



SLAYERS

10

CONSPIRACY IN SOLARIA

BY HAJIME KANZAKA
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RUI ARAIZUMI

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1: Another Day, Another Magic Sword Search

The desolate ruins were steeped in darkness. Gourry and I held our breath, searching for any sign of movement. Dim light radiated from the glowing magical orb over our heads as silent moment after silent moment passed. There came a shadowy flicker in the light. And then, after an instant that felt both all too short and dreadfully long... it appeared.

Gourry! I wanted to shout, but before I could, he turned to face the presence emerging from the wall.

“Hyah!” With a cry of effort, he took a great slash with his sword!

I could hear the hum of a collapsing vacuum as he cut through the thing coming out of the wall—the ghost. *Greeeee!* It let out an ear-splitting squeal as it disappeared in a puff of white mist.

“Did I... do it?” Gourry asked, keeping his fighting posture.

I nodded firmly in response.

“All rrrright! I did it!” Gourry beamed, raising his sword triumphantly.

I stood there at something of a loss for how to react to Gourry’s revelry. I mean... it was just a ghost, man. Nothing *that* exciting.



“Seriously, cutting down one dang ghost isn’t anything to write home about,” I was still muttering to myself as we sat eating dinner in a small establishment.

“But I’ve never had a sword that could hurt ghosts before... so I think it’s pretty great, personally,” Gourry responded lightly as he shoveled down some fried sardines.

I replied with a deep sigh, “What about the Sword of Light before, man?! Don’t tell me you forgot that already!”

“Why would I forget?” Gourry asked, completely unfazed.

Darn it...

The Sword of Light was one of the most legendary magic weapons known to man. It appeared in many a minstrel’s saga, and there wasn’t a sorcerer out there who hadn’t heard its name. Said incredible magic sword was formerly in the possession of Gourry Numbnuts here... but he’d lost it as the result of a particular series of events. So here we were, off on a long, meandering journey to find him a replacement magic sword.

Now, you might be thinking, “What, can’t he make do with a normal sword?” And if so, the joke’s on you, buddy. There are baddies in this world that a regular ol’ sword can’t even scratch—and I mean that literally. The weakest are your ghost-type creepies; the strongest are your pure demons. Now, if ghosts were our biggest worry, then sure, Gourry could just kick back while I dished out the old attack spell buffet. But demons? They required, let’s say, a more layered approach.

In truth, we’d had to fight a demon recently, and I gotta say... Gourry with a mundane sword just hadn’t cut it. That whole encounter lit a fire under my ass about getting him a magic sword—any magic sword at all—so I’d picked up a stopgap at a magic shop in town the other day. Pretty much the only reason we’d taken the crummy banish-the-ghost-from-the-creepy-old-ruins-for-chump-change job was to give his new blade a test run.

“Okay, Gourry. Listen up,” I said, waving my fork around meaninglessly. “That sword can slay a ghost, true, but it’s still just a standard silver-plated blade inlaid with a couple of jeweled talismans. It ain’t gonna do squat against a

sorcerer's Flare Arrows, much less a pure demon. Also, this might go without saying, but it *will* break if you put enough force into it."

"Aha..." Gourry paused in his eating and stared keenly at the sword leaning against the table. He then grumbled, "So it's cheap."

"It's cheap, huh?! Just who do you think paid for that thing?! I mean, sure, as magic swords go, it is more on the budget-friendly side... But it was still ten times more expensive than any normal sword!"

"Oh, so it's expensive?"

"Yes! So be careful with it, okay? You should probably treat it mostly like you would a normal sword. Got it?"

Gourry just hummed and scratched his head in confusion.

"For your information... if you're about to say 'I wasn't listening' or 'I was listening but I already forgot what you said,' I'm gonna lay you out flat, so don't even think about it."

"No, I was listening, and I remember what you said. It can't cut through magic or demons, and it'll break if I'm too rough with it, right?"

Wow! The big lug actually listened for once! "Then what's with the hemming and hawing?"

"Well... I can remember all that now. I'm just wondering if I'll still remember when it comes time to use it."

"Don't be so self-defeating! Make a commitment to remember!" I shouted, skewering some chicken teriyaki, which I immediately shoved into my mouth and gulped down. "That sword is gonna have to last you until we find a better one, so freaking be careful with it already!"

"R-Right..." Gourry nodded firmly, perhaps too cowed to argue, as he snagged a fried shrimp with the fork in his other hand.

Don't accuse me of nagging, okay? That thing cost me a fortune! Even at the cheapest price possible as a secondhand article, a sword with talismans means a through-the-nose surcharge.

"But Lina, do you really think we're going to find a powerful magic sword?"

We've been searching for a few months now, and all the rumors we hear turn out to be frauds and fakes."

"I admit finding one won't be easy, but we'll do it someday. I believe it. There's always a chance," I said, echoing wisdom a golden dragon elder had once shared with me. I followed up with a sip of hot black tea to wash down my meal.

Later that night, I was awoken—*Thump*—by some kind of sound.

Hmm? I listened hard for a while, still lying in bed in my room at the inn. Nothing reached my ears but the rustle of the wind and insects buzzing outside my window.

Just my imagination? I wondered. But then...

Thump. Whomp-omp!

This time, I could clearly hear the noise coming from the next room—Gourry's. It didn't sound like someone rolling out of bed either. It almost sounded like a scuffle...

Fwsh! I silently threw off my blanket, grabbed just my shortsword, and strode out of my room in my pajamas. I stood on guard outside of Gourry's door.

"Gourry? What's up?!" I called.

"Oh, hey, Lina. Got a visitor is all," Gourry responded in his usual laid-back way.

A visitor?!

"Come on in," he offered. "It's open."

Curious, I pushed the door inward. Gourry's rather small room was illuminated by the dim orange glow of a single lamp, accompanied by the distinctive smell of burning animal fat. Gourry stood in the middle of the place... over an unfamiliar man who lay unconscious on the floor.

"Hiya, Lina," Gourry said lightly, holding up a hand in greeting.

"What in the world...?" I nudged the head of the unconscious man with my

sheathed sword. “Would this so-called ‘visitor’ actually be a burglar?”

“Hey, good guess!”

“It seems pretty obvious, given his current state...”

I took the opportunity to root through the guy’s pockets, find some rope, and tie his hands behind his back with it. He’d probably thought he’d be the one tying someone up tonight. Rotten luck that he’d chosen Gourry’s room to infiltrate... My dude had animal-like senses, so it would take more than your average intruder to break into his room undetected.

“There we go!” I said as I pulled the knot tight with gusto.

“Geh...” Just as I finished up, the man opened up his eyes with a groan. “Ah! Crap!”

Realizing the situation he was in, he instantly began to struggle. I’d tied him too tightly for that to work though (natch).

“You can’t wriggle your way out of this one, pal,” I informed him. “Give it a rest already.”

“Ngh!” The man glared at me but ceased his resistance.

“Now... how’s about we ask a few questions? What were you planning to steal out of this room?”

No answer. The man just gave me the silent treatment.

Why interrogate him instead of just taking him to the authorities, you ask? Ha! Amateurs! Cities rife with petty burglaries are frequently home to a fence operation or two. If I got him to point us to their home base, I could raid it and net myself a double-or triple-dip of profits.

“We’ve got a few other ways of making you talk, y’know,” I said, pressing the tip of my sheathed sword against him.

But the man, cool as a cucumber, replied, “You think I’m scared of a little girl in her pajamas?”

Oh, right... I *was* still in my pajamas. Not exactly my most intimidating moment, huh? *Okay, then let’s try this!*

“Not scared of a woman in pajamas, eh?”

“Nope.”

“In that case...” I pointed over at Gourry. “How’d you like being propositioned by a man in *his* pajamas?!”

“Whaaaaat?!” The man let out a scream, apparently appalled by the thought.

Gourry didn’t seem fond of the idea either, but I ignored his plaintive expression.

“D-Don’t tell me... he’s...” the man faltered with a fearful glance at Gourry. “He’s into *that*?!”

“You bet he is,” I responded unflinchingly.

“Hey...” Gourry finally spoke up, but I kept ignoring him.

“F-Fine! I’ll talk, I’ll talk! Just spare me, please!” This threat induced the man to struggle and cry.

Wait... did this guy have bad memories or something? Dang... But questions about his past aside, it looked like he was willing to talk now.

“First, why come after us? And don’t try to tell me it was a coincidence, okay?” I pressed.

“Yeeeeek! I won’t, I won’t!” The man shot another uneasy glance at Gourry. “I... I overheard you... in the restaurant... You were saying you had a magic sword, yeah? I thought I could sell it for some good money.”

“I see... So you know someone who’s paying top coin for magic swords, eh?”

“W-Well... sort of, I think...” the man responded vaguely.

“And? Who is it?”

The man sank into silence for a moment before imploring, “I can tell you, but... do me a favor in exchange. Please?”

“What kind of favor?”

“If I tell you, I’ll be selling out my partners. That means I’m basically dead to them. In fact, I could end up *literally* dead... If I get arrested and there’s

suddenly a crackdown, they'll know I sold them out. So please... I'll tell you, but in exchange, don't turn me over to the authorities, okay?"

"So you want us to let you go?"

"W-Well... that's one way to put it, yes... Oh, I know! If you let me go, I'll give you all the money I have!" he whispered weakly, watching for my reaction.

Hmm... I wasn't a fan of letting criminals loose out of the goodness of my heart. Still, I didn't want to flat-out say no and have him get cold feet about spilling the beans. *Wait, I know!*

"Fine. I'll think about it," I compromised.

"You mean it?!"

"Hey now!" Gourry objected. (I was still ignoring him, of course.)

"Well? Who's your connection?" I asked, encouraging the would-be burglar to continue.

"So, there's a guy I know who's always hurting for money. Then recently, out of nowhere, he buys us all a round of drinks. I ask him what's up, and he says he happened to get his hands on a magical sword, which he then sold to a certain buyer who filled his purse for the favor."

"A certain buyer?"

"Yeah... You know Solaria, a little ways to the west?"

"Sure. It's the largest city in the area." I didn't know too much about it, but I'd at least heard its name.

"It's a pretty big castle town, and the castle at the center belongs to the local lord, Lord Langmeier."

"This is gonna take a while, huh?" I said dryly.

"No, I'm almost done," the man insisted, shaking his head hastily. "He said that Lord Langmeier will pay a premium for magic swords."

"The lord himself is making the offer?"

"Apparently. It's what my friend said, anyway... See? That didn't take long at all, did it?!"

Hmm... It had the ring of plausibility, at least. People who collected swords were typically either filthy rich or filthy thieves. Local lords, generals, and people with great political power were particularly inclined to the hobby. And if someone like *that* was the one hoarding magic swords 'round here, I couldn't just waltz in and use my standard smack-'em-around-and-take-the-loot trick. That's how you end up a wanted woman, after all! I'd need a different plan.

"So... if you believe me, then please untie me!" the man begged.

I folded my arms and cocked my head. "Hmm... but if I let you get away, you might do the same thing to someone else, or you might come after us again. I'm gonna turn you in after all."

"W-Wait, please!" The man's face turned bright red. "You promised! You said you'd let me go!"

"You should've listened better," I said, wagging my finger at him. "I said I'd *think* about it. So I did, and I've decided to turn you in after all!"

"Damn you! You tricked me!"

"Didn't, tho!" I said with a big grin.

"You swindler! Devil! Hag! Bitch!" the man cried, glaring at me.

"You think childish insults like that are gonna hurt me? You're just revealing your own ignorance."

"Wh-What'd you say?! In that case... Child! Pipsqueak! Washboard!"

Grrrrr! Th-Those ones... did sting a little...

Still, if I socked him one, it'd be like admitting he'd won. The best thing to do at times like this is just grin and bear it. Keeping your cool always gets someone's goat way better than any outburst. So I fought back the urge to start cooking up a Fireball, and said, calmly, "I commend your effort, but those are still lowbrow insults."

"Urgh! Nrgh!" The man purpled and fell silent.

Ha! Got 'im. But just as I was basking in my victory...

"Fine." The man gave me a strained smile. "If you want real trash talk, I'll lay it

on you. This is the worst insult in history. One I haven't used since it ruined a lifelong friendship..."

"Yeah? Sounds interesting. Give it a try, then."

"You're..." he began, glaring up at me as I smirked. "You're more disgusting than Lina Inverse!"

Snap!

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?!"

"See?! Ha! I got you mad!"

"Agh! Calm down, Lina! Please don't use a Dragon Slave!"

The cries of the three of us—me, the burglar, and Gourry—echoed through the inn in the still of the night.

"Hmm... not much of a haul, was it?" I whispered with a sigh as I checked the money in the small leather pouch. We'd gotten it as a reward for handing the burglar over to the authorities.

Turned out the guy was a repeat offender, but he was only worth a mere five silvers. I mean, sure, he wasn't an especially pernicious criminal—and I'd come to expect stinginess from the local authorities by now—but still, five silvers?

"This just confirms it's way more profitable to bully bandits and loot their bases like a normal person," I muttered as we walked on.

"But it's better than nothing, right?"

"Well... I guess. Anyhoo! Off to Solaria City to bust up a local lord and swipe a magic sword or three!"

"W-Wait a minute, Lina!" Gourry said, quickly dousing my excitement.

"What?"

"What do you mean, what? You can't do that! He's a lord, remember? If you blast him and steal his treasure, we'll end up on wanted posters for sure!"

"Hahhhhhhhh..." Gourry's words drove me to an exhausted sigh. "Dude... you really think I'd be that reckless?"

“You really think I think you *wouldn't* be that reckless? Er, I mean, never mind... Of course you wouldn't! Please continue!” Perhaps noticing the rage building in my eyes, Gourry quickly withdrew his complaint.

“I don't wanna end up on the lam for this either. I figured we'd do the diplomatic thing and make him an offer: ‘Give us a couple of magic swords and we won't tell the king that you're buying stolen goods!’”

“You call that diplomacy?”

“Where I'm from.”

“What the heck goes on where you're from?”

“Never you mind! It's also possible our burglar was lying to us, of course, so we should investigate before all else. In other words... on to Solaria City!”

The bigger a city gets, the more lively it becomes... and the more twisted. Solaria was a prime example of such ongoing distortion. I'm not saying it was unsafe or anything. I'm saying the place was laid out like a maze.

It was common enough for a castle town to be totally surrounded by defensive walls, and this one was no exception. Except when a city grows, its population and needs can quickly fill the place up and then some. So you end up building residences and facilities outside the wall. Then you have to build a new wall around *those*, and when *that* space fills up... rinse, repeat. This process had resulted in Solaria City becoming a disorderly mess of snaking walls cordoning off each of the various city blocks. It was easy to get disoriented if you hadn't lived there all your life.

A hypothetical outsider, then, might find themselves walking toward the castle's spires and suddenly find their path blocked by a wall. They might then decide to follow said wall until they happened upon a way through, but without knowing the shortest route there... they might end up wandering through city blocks in a completely hopeless detour.

Long story short, Gourry and I were lost.

“Hey, that inn we passed a while back...” Gourry piped up.

“What about it?” I replied sullenly as we soldiered on through the darkening city.

“I feel like we passed a place with the same name just now...”

“We did.”

Gourry considered my answer for a moment, then asked, “Is it a chain?”

“We’re lost, okay?! Dead lost!”

“Oh, okay!” Gourry clapped his hands in understanding. “That explains it.”

“S-Sure it does...” I muttered limply, having lost the will to yell.

We’d arrived in the city some time after noon, found an eatery for a light lunch, and then set out to find an inn nearer to the castle... but we still weren’t anywhere close.



“Couldn’t we have just asked for directions at the restaurant in the first place, Lina?”

“Sure... I just didn’t expect navigating the city to be *quite* this annoying...” I whispered in exhaustion as we continued our aimless wandering.

The smells of dinner began to drift from the houses around us. I caught a whiff of vegetables in broth—probably stew. Then there was the heavenly aroma of fatty fish frying from the nearest house. The irresistible smell of seared meat emanated from a few other residences as well.

I’m so hungry...

I stopped, let out a deep sigh, and said, “I guess we’ll just call it a night at the closest inn and try again in force tomorrow.”

“Yeah. That’s a good idea. Uh-huh,” Gourry said in immediate, thought-free agreement.

The sky above the city was already turning indigo.

“Wow, there sure are a lot of big buildings around here,” I remarked as we wandered the blocks encircling the castle.

It was the next day now. We’d stayed the night at an inn and asked the old innkeeper for directions before setting out again.

In terms of scale, Lord Langmeier’s castle was neither especially large nor especially small. Its architecture wasn’t anything remarkable either. It was made of light gray stone, and its decorations were perfectly modest. To be frank, it was pretty much your archetypal castle. But there was one point of interest: the various facilities *around* the castle.

As a city grew, its central district usually came to replace ordinary residences with government offices and temples. But the sheer quantity of newly built structures in the heart of Solaria seemed mighty fishy to my eye. At a glance, they looked normal enough... except they were all walled off for some reason, with guards posted at all times. Any attempted visitors got turned away on obvious pretexts. According to the innkeeper, quite a few of these had popped

up recently.

“Say, Lina, what are we supposed to learn by walking around like this?”

“Nothing,” I responded.

“C’mon...” Gourry whined, his primary objection seeming to be to all the walking.

“But we can do plenty of speculating.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you see all these places? What the innkeep described as ‘unusual buildings built to look usual’? All these well guarded, walled-off structures?”

“Matter of fact, I did notice a whole lot of stone-faced types around ‘em...”

“Right? They’re probably all military facilities.”

“Military?!”

“Hush! Keep your voice down! You don’t know who might be listening!”

“O-Okay... But what exactly are you getting at?”

“Military facilities springing up, plus rumors that the lord’s buying up magic swords... Makes you think someone’s getting ready for war, doesn’t it?”

Gourry gasped and fell silent in shock.

“These are all signs of someone preparing for a fight. But I doubt a lone lord would attack another country out of nowhere. It’s far more likely that this is a domestic affair... In other words, he’s going after the king.”

“I see... So it’s insurrection.”

“I’ll admit there are plenty of other explanations. Maybe they’re researching new weapons, or selling them to other countries...”

“B-But... doesn’t that mean your plan to steal a sword is pretty dangerous?”

“Yeah. Probably.”

Going up to someone plotting a rebellion and blackmailing them for buying stolen goods was basically like asking to be permanently silenced. Of course, Gourry and I weren’t just gonna just sit back and let that happen, but there was

no need to push our luck.

“But on the other hand... if we can find proof of insurrection and report it to the king, he might give us a magic sword as a reward!”

“You’re a nasty lady, you know that?”

“What are you talking about? An insurrection would put lots of innocent people in danger! And we’d deserve a reward for saving them all! Or are you saying we should just sit on our hands when we know a rebellion is brewing?”

“Oh... Well, when you put it that way...”

“See? So we’d better hurry! Let’s sneak into one of these babies tonight and find us some proof!”

The only sound in town that night was the wind. If there were bars nearby, we would have been able to hear their raucous din, but they were absent here in the city center. Street lamps aglow with Lighting spells stood here and there, offering halfhearted illumination against the oppressive darkness.

When the half-moon above dipped behind the clouds, everything apart from the city lights was drenched in black. And blending into that blackness...

Gourry and I darted down the road, heading for a building we’d scouted out earlier. We were hiding our faces with black masks and headwraps in case anybody spotted us, and we had swapped our usual outfits for nondescript dark clothing.

Our target was the facility that had seemed to have the strictest security during the day. It looked like an ordinary temple on the outside, but the high wall around it and the security at the gate even at this hour told a different tale.

Why’d we choose this spot? It was obvious: the strict security was a sign of the building’s importance. I mean, what would be the point of breaking into an easier place if it didn’t have what we needed inside?

“Levitation!” I released a hushed incantation, and Gourry and I lifted off into the dark sky.

“Dang... Lots of guards, huh?” Gourry whispered, clinging to my collar.

The overhead view was pretty revealing. Inside the wall was a lone temple-like structure with a domed roof. It was surrounded by ornamental trees and stone garden pillars, behind which were countless guards keeping a vigilant eye on the lawn.

“Lina, look at all these guards. They’ll see us right away if we aren’t careful.”

“Yeah. I guess we’d better be careful then, huh? I’m taking us in, so zip your lips for a bit, capisce?”

I directed my spell to take us right over the building, then lower us down slowly onto the central roof. The guards were only watching the ground, after all. We should go completely unnoticed coming from above.

I pulled a thin rope from a bag I’d brought with me, tied it to the large stone idol at the apex of the dome, and used it to slide down. The rope was magically reinforced, of course. It appeared thin, but it was strong enough to hold a dragon... er, at least a small one.

When I hit the edge of the roof, I first confirmed that no guards were looking, then peered down below. I scanned left and right until I spotted what looked like a small door a little ways away. I signaled to Gourry with my eyes and then adjusted my position, still holding the rope. Once we were over the door, I observed the patrol patterns of the guards in the area, and...

Okay! Now! I judged my timing, hit the ground, and checked the door. There wasn’t just any lock on it... It seemed to be sealed shut with a Lock spell.

I began a quiet chant, then tapped the doorknob with my right index finger. “Unlock,” I incanted, unleashing a lockpicking spell I’d learned recently.

Clack. The sound from the knob suggested the spell had worked. I signaled to Gourry, who jumped off the roof after me. We then swiftly entered the building through our newly opened door.

“Dark in here,” I muttered softly enough that only Gourry could hear.

Even with the moon behind the clouds, we’d still had ambient starlight outside. But there wasn’t a single lamp on in here. It was as close to pitch black as you could get. Nevertheless, through the... atmosphere, let’s say, or the flow of the air around us... I could tell we were in a rather cavernous space. I didn’t

sense anyone present other than Gourry.

“Seems kinda... empty,” he remarked.

“Can you make out anything, Gourry?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

Wow. He really does have exceptional eyesight... But while I was appreciating his eyes, my own were gradually growing accustomed to the darkness as well with the help of a faint moonbeam straying in through the stained glass window in the roof. The first thing I noticed was that, as I’d guessed, we were in a big, open room. The second point of note was rows of something boxy lined up before us.

“They’re just seats, I think,” Gourry said, gesturing toward one.

I walked up to touch one, and he was right. The rows of boxy shapes were wooden pews, like you’d find in any place of worship.

“Huh...”

We wandered around with hushed footsteps for a while, but in all respects, the place seemed like a run-of-the-mill church.

“Just an ordinary cathedral, huh?” Gourry observed for himself.

“By all appearances, sure. But remember there’s a wall around this building and a dozen guards outside. The door was also magically locked. You think they’d put security like that on an ordinary cathedral?”

“Maybe they’re paranoid.”

“Get real. You know how much a detail like that costs?”

“Then what’s going on here?”

“I suspect the real facility is down below. They designed it this way so that if anyone did manage to break in, they’d *think* it was just an ordinary cathedral. And even if someone figured out it wasn’t, they’d have a heck of a time finding a hidden door or switch in a room of this size.”

Let’s assume there’s a switch on one of the kneelers or the feet of one of the pews. It’d take long enough to find it in the daylight, but trying to uncover it

now is nigh-on impossible...

And while I was thinking about that... *Tug!*

“Wugh?!”

Gourry had suddenly grabbed my hand and pulled. A second later...

Vwomm!

A bolt of light streaked past my head! It continued to sail through the darkness, then broke apart against the floor.

“Pretty sharp for a little rat,” echoed a hoarse, deep male voice from all around us.

“You’re pretty impressive yourself. I didn’t sense you at all,” Gourry responded.

I followed his eyeline to the stained glass panes... Aha! There was a person just in front of them—floating in the air. But just as I spotted him, he dropped down into the darkness below.

“He’s coming!” Gourry called.

“On it!”

We both drew our swords and stood at the ready. In that moment, I sensed movement in my peripheral vision.

Whoosh! I quickly whipped out of the way, but something grazed by me—probably a throwing knife of some kind.

This wasn’t a great position to be in. Our opponent didn’t seem to have any trouble in the dark, which put me, at least, at a severe disadvantage. That being the case...

I chanted a quiet spell and incanted, “Lighting!”

This produced a reduced-luminosity ball of magical light, which I threw over my head. It was dim, but it flooded the room with just enough light to see by if your eyes were already adjusted. Now that the enemy knew we were here, there was no point in playing around in the dark. I was hoping this might distract my opponent while allowing me to see what was going on.

My light illuminated white walls and a long row of wooden pews... with a dark figure amongst them.

“Huh?!”

He looked familiar to me... at least, his clothes did. He was dressed in all black, with even his face covered so that only two eyes were peeking out from the cloth. It was an archetypal assassin getup... but there was something about this guy that seemed different from your typical assassin.



Gourry and I had tangled with a mysterious gang of thugs in the city of Bezeld over a magic sword, and their members had dressed the same way. But right now, I was less concerned about this guy's identity and more concerned about how to get out of here!

"Let's beat it!" I shouted.

We turned our backs on the man, who was currently hunched over to shield his eyes, and made a beeline for the door we'd come in through. But...

"You won't escape!" Another man in black leaped out from the pews to block our way!

There's more of them?! This new figure threw knives our way!

"That's nothing!" Gourry shouted as he stepped forward with a sweep of his sword. *Clink! Shing!* He knocked the knives right out of the air.

Perhaps realizing knives wouldn't work anymore, the man drew his sword instead.

Don't forget I'm here too, okay?! I waited for the man in black to get close, and then...

"Dam Blas!" I unleashed my spell at very close range. No way could he dodge this one! Except...

Crash! He swept his left hand at my sure-kill spell, effortlessly dispersing it!

Impossible! Dam Blas wasn't the kind of spell you could just bat away with your bare hands! The darn thing could smash through a wall! I hadn't detected any signs of the guy chanting a defensive spell either...

"Hah!" Gourry shouted, as if to rip me from my thoughts.

Shing! Sparks flew as his sword collided with the man in black's. At the same time, I felt a hostile presence rise up behind me.

I didn't even have to turn back. The man I'd distracted with my Lighting spell had recovered and was charging at me from the rear. But if he threw a knife at me and I dodged, it would hit Gourry! Which meant...

"Hwaaah!" With a cry, I took a flying leap and landed on Gourry's back!

“Bwuh?!”

“What?!”

Both Gourry and the man in black he was fighting let out startled cries. My sudden appearance in the fray had thrown them both off balance, sending all three of us tumbling to the floor. As we fell, I felt something rush over my head.

Hah! Dodged it!

“Hey, Lina, watch it!”

“Please save any and all complaints for later!”

Grabbing Gourry’s hand as he stood up, I dashed through the door.

Wham! The dark of night greeted us outside, right along with the rallying guards. They’d be tough to break through—but the sky overhead was wide open!

“Lei Wing!” Holding on tight to Gourry’s hand, I used an amplified high-speed flight spell to take off into the air. We sailed over the guards’ heads, over the wall, and out into the city.

“Hey! Lina!”

I’d been flying for a while when Gourry called out to me. We were some ways away from the temple now.

“What?!” I called back.

“We’re not going back to the inn, are we?”

“Where else are we supposed to go?!”

“Don’t do it! They’re following us!”

“What?!”

I quickly looked behind us. I couldn’t see much between the distortion from my wind barrier and the darkness. Thinking about it, we were currently streaking over the city roofs with an enhanced Lei Wing. They shouldn’t be able to follow us... Key word being *shouldn’t*.

“Are you serious, Gourry?!”

“I’m sure of it! I can’t see them, but I feel two presences following us!”

Gourry had the instincts of a wild animal, so if they were telling him someone was there, then I wasn’t gonna doubt it. Two presences suggested it was probably the guys in black from before... meaning Gourry was right and it wouldn’t be safe to head right back to our inn.

I changed course and took us down into a relatively dense cluster of buildings, dismissing the spell as we landed. All was silent. There was no sign of pursuit. But I could feel a tension in the ostensibly calm night air. Someone was there, concealing their presence, in the dark.

“Lina!”

Vm! I heard something tearing through the air behind us just as Gourry tried to warn me about it. *Fwsh!* I quickly moved to dodge, but the small flying object ripped my mask off! A throwing knife?!

“Guh!”

I turned to run, but a figure emerged from the black. As I thought... it was one of them! My torn mask fell to the ground, exposing my face to the moonlight.

“Oho...” he hummed as he caught sight of me.

“Guess there really is something in that building,” I said, hoping to bait him.

“We just came by to finish off some illegal intruders,” came another voice from behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the second man in black come out from around a building.

I’m surrounded... “Gourry, cut us a way through. We’re getting out of here,” I whispered, standing back-to-back with him.

“We’re not fighting?”

“I don’t want to make trouble in the city. Not yet.” I could easily bust out a big spell that would cause enough of a commotion to let us escape... But if I was too reckless in my escalation, any ensuing chaos would technically be on my head.

“I don’t quite get it, but fine! Let’s go!” Gourry agreed, charging at the man in front of him!

The man started in surprise, and I took the opportunity to follow after Gourry. He and the man in black drew their weapons at the same time! *Clash!* Sword met sword, and sparks scattered in the night.

Gourry slid his blade along his opponent’s to throw it off course, then slipped past the man and dashed off. Our black-clad buddy briefly seemed uncertain about whether to pursue Gourry or meet my charge, though he ultimately turned his sword, glinting in the moonlight, on me. Too bad for him...

“Lei Wing!” The wind barrier created by my Lei Wing, activated at close range, blasted both the dude and his blade away! I then caught up with Gourry and dismissed the spell. We kept running together as I chanted my next one.

After fleeing down the main avenue and cutting onto a side street, we kept turning wherever we could. Keeping too straight would get us throwing knives in the back for our trouble. Continually snaking our course would help confuse our pursuers too. Of course, if they could keep up with my boosted Lei Wing, I kind of doubted that a few corners would be all it took to lose them...

As we ran, I spotted a narrow alleyway, gestured, and had Gourry enter ahead of me. Before long, the men in black appeared behind us! They were probably going to use more knives. It would be hard to dodge them like this, but I waited for the men to stop as they made to throw and...

“Diem Wind!” I took that brief opportunity to unleash the amplified wind spell I’d chanted!

Vroosh! The gust rushing down the alley roared into a full-on squall that blew back the men in black!

“Okay! Now book it!”

I sped up and encouraged Gourry to do the same. I’d sent our pursuers flying, but they’d be back on our tails again soon enough. We didn’t have a moment to lose. Eventually, Gourry and I made it out of the alley and...

“Geh!” I let out a short groan as I came to a stop. There was a long wall stretching out in front of us.

Yup. It was one of the walls between city blocks. We couldn't turn back now, and if we ran along the wall, we wouldn't have any place to hide. That meant our only option was going up and over! I swiftly chanted my next spell, and...

"Lina!" Gourry shouted, pushing me before I could finish!

Bwoosh! After came a howl of wind. An unseen force shot out from the alley and crashed into the wall ahead of us—probably a pressure blast from some kind of spell. Shortly after, the two figures reappeared. I was shocked they'd caught up already.

Two of us and two men in black... The four of us squared off once more.

"You can't escape us," one of the men said lightly, without any sense of boasting.

I didn't doubt him. They clearly weren't going to let us go without a fight, and they knew the terrain much better than we did.

Guess we'll just have to throw down after all. But as that thought entered my mind...

"What's all this ruckus in the middle of the night?" came a new voice from atop the wall.

I looked up and saw a figure standing stoically against the backdrop of the night. It sounded like a man, but his face was hidden behind a cloth wrap. He didn't seem to be with the guys in black, but he was definitely a similar level of sketchy.

"Who are you?!" one of the men in black demanded.

"Don't make so much noise. You'll wake the neighbors... is all I'll say for now," the masked man atop the wall replied calmly.

"Are you with them?!" the man in black barked back.

"Certainly not, but—"

"Then keep your nose out of this! We're trying to arrest ruffians who infiltrated a local facility!" he now shouted shakily, perhaps a bit rattled by the interference of this unknown third party.

Meanwhile, the masked man just snorted in amusement. “Ruffians? You look far ‘rougher’ than they do, to my eyes. Not that I’m one to talk... But at the least, it’s obvious from your dress that you’re not agents of the law authorized to make arrests.”

The guys in black fell silent for a moment, then... *Whoosh!* One of them threw something. The masked man on the wall made a motion with his hand, and the next instant, a small knife appeared in it.

“What?!” the man in black shouted in shock.

I was guessing he’d thrown the knife, which the masked man had then caught. Pulling that off in the dark took some pretty serious chops!

“I see. You’ve made things quite clear.” The masked man tossed the knife aside. “You *are* the ruffians in this situation, which means I cannot let you go. I suppose a flashy battle here and now would cause a commotion... Rumors of it are sure to spread to other cities. Though that won’t particularly bother *me*...”

“Ngh!”

I wasn’t quite sure what the masked man was hinting at, but the men in black seemed distinctly shaken by the threat.

“Then... shall we?” the masked man proposed, beginning a chant.

“Let’s get out of here,” one of the men in black whispered forthwith. They then both leaped back and disappeared down the alley they’d emerged from.

“That... That seemed a little too easy,” muttered Gourry.

“Y-Yeah. Speaking of...” After watching the men flee, I turned my eyes back to the top of the wall... only to find the masked man was already gone.

“Say... is it okay for us to just sit back like this?” Gourry asked quietly the next morning. Upon our table on the first floor of the tavern was a full spread of breakfast platters, which we were steadily making our way through. “Won’t those guys be looking for us?”

“They might be, but to be honest... I’m not sure,” I admitted, taking a bite of bacon and lettuce salad. “If the men in black are connected to the local lord, I

figure they'll definitely show up again. They could make up any pretext they wanted to arrest us. But we now know that, for some reason, they don't want a big stink made out of this. And it's not like our break-in yielded anything incriminating. So rather than hunting us down and escalating things, they might have decided it's best to leave well enough alone."

I hadn't noticed any increased activity among the town guard since last night either, which implied someone was willing to let sleeping dogs lie. Nevertheless...

"I agree that the safest course would be to leave the city," I conceded. "But after all that, I'm all the more eager to find out what's going on. That masked man yesterday seemed to know something."

"Oh, him? He did seem pretty capable. And judging from his voice, he seemed on the older side..." Gourry said, taking a bite out of a croissant sandwiched around not-too-sweet whipped cream.

I paused my breakfasting, swaying my fork between my fingers. "So the real question is... are these the same black cloaks we fought before?"

"When?"

"You know, for the sword in Bezeld? When we teamed up with that weird couple, Luke and Mileena? And battled that big thing with the insta-regeneration?"

"Oh, right. I think I sorta remember that!"

"Remember the guys in black that kept hassling us? Let's just say they share a tailor with the guys we met in the temple."

"Which means..."

"Yup." I nodded firmly at Gourry. "The ruthless sword-hunters might be based outta here. Or maybe it's this Lord Langmeier guy himself who's behind the whole deal. Either way," I slammed my fork into a thick slice of ham and whispered, "this is gonna be trouble."

Hrk! Gourry's face froze over. "I think it might already be trouble," he said, pointing behind me... at the front entrance to the tavern.

“Hmm?” I turned around, brow furrowed, and...

Hrrrrrk! I immediately realized the cause of his expression. Standing at the entrance were two city guards. They glanced at the paper they were holding, then glanced back at me.

Hang on! So they did decide to arrest us?!

The two guards marched right up to our table. Gourry and I clamored to our feet, ready for action... but the two guards suddenly came to attention. “Pardon me. Would you be Mistress Lina Inverse, by chance?” one asked.

For a second, I considered telling him he had the wrong gal, but the paper he was carrying clearly either had my defining features listed or my likeness drawn on it. I wasn’t going to be able to fib my way around that, and if they looked at the inn’s logbook, the jig would be up anyway.

“I am,” I answered warily.

The two guards quickly bowed. “We serve Langmeier, lord of this city!” one proclaimed with booming formality. “His regent has requested your esteemed company for dinner.”

“Huh?” Gourry and I gawked in unison.

“Say... what exactly is going on here?” Gourry asked as we strode the sunset-soaked avenue toward the castle that evening.

“Dunno,” I responded bluntly. Of all the things I’d been expecting, an invitation to dinner wasn’t high on the list. “There’re a lot of possibilities. First, it’s total coincidence. Maybe the regent just happens to know who I am, just happened to hear I was in town, and just happened to be looking for me today...”

“Seems unlikely.”

“Agreed. Another possibility is there are multiple factions at play here, and that the men in black and the regent are on opposite sides. Thus, the regent is reaching out to get our help putting down the men in black.”

“Got it.”

“And last but not least... there’s a possibility that the regent is in cahoots with the men in black, and this invitation is a trap.”

“That does seem to be the most likely suspect, yeah.”

“Right? I agree.”

“Um... Then why are we going?”

“Because!”

Wham! My flippant reply sent Gourry into a pratfall. “You took his invitation just ‘because’?! You just said that it could be a trap!”

“Okay, well, let’s say I turned the regent down. If he really is fighting the men in black, we’d be leaving him high and dry.”

“Well... I guess.”

“Conversely, if they’re in cahoots and I turned him down, do you really think he’d just be like, ‘Oh, okay, no problem,’ and leave us alone forever?”

“Well... of course not, but...”

“Right? So either way, if we want to get the lay of the land, our best plan of attack is to accept the invitation. If it’s a trap, then it’s a trap, and we can bust through it when it springs!”

“That seems pretty reckless... though I guess that’s nothing new.”

“Live a little, man! And most importantly...”

“Most importantly?” Gourry asked.

I responded with a wink. “I just won’t be satisfied until I’ve solved the mystery, y’know?”

“You’re so weird...” My words brought a wince to Gourry’s face, and he plopped a hand on my head. “But that’s okay. I’ll stick by you a while longer, at least.”

“Thanks a bunch, self-proclaimed guardian man. Now...” I turned my eyes straight to the castle that was our destination. “Let’s get in there, Gourry!”

“Pardon the delay,” an elderly butler said with great formality as he arrived in the antechamber where we’d been waiting.

Following our earlier conversation, we’d marched boldly into the castle where we’d been received with a polite welcome. We were then shown to this small sitting room while dinner was prepared. No trouble thus far, at least, and no sign of hostility from the various servants who attended to us either. The waiting accommodations were actually pretty cushy, so we’d just been killing time until the butler arrived.

“Dinner is served. The regent awaits,” he announced.

Gourry and I shared a silent glance, then nodded. Shit was about to get real!

“Understood,” I responded as we stood up.

The butler then showed us through the door and down a long hall to follow. “Right this way,” he finally said, coming to a stop in front of a door.

Okay... time to find out what we’re dealing with here.

“You may enter,” he encouraged, opening the door to reveal...

“Huh?!” Gourry and I both halted in our tracks.

Inside the room was a long table covered in a white cloth and silver candlesticks. Magical lights blazed in sconces on the wall. And at the head of it all was a young man. He was probably a little over twenty, and was dressed in white in a fashion that could be called either “classy” or “pretentious” depending on your predilections. Either way, it made for a striking contrast to his fiery red hair. There was a beaming smile on his handsome face.

I presumed he was the lord’s regent... But he wasn’t the reason Gourry and I were so surprised. That honor belonged to the two bodyguards standing behind him—a raven-haired man and a silver-haired woman. There was no chance of mistaken identity. This was the odd couple we’d teamed up with to fight men in black before, Luke and Mileena!

2: Not a Fan of the Cloak and Dagger Stuff, Y'know?

“Welcome, Lina Inverse. Do forgive the wait.” The redhead’s words snapped me and Gourry out of our shock. He stood up and beckoned for us to join him. “By all means, come sit. Make yourselves comfortable.”

“Oh... sure. Th-Thank you for inviting us,” I responded, still a little stiff as I stepped into the room.

“The pleasure is mine, truly. I’m delighted to finally meet the famous Lina Inverse.”

“Famous, huh?” I whispered as we took our seats. I was hoping that whatever he’d heard about me hadn’t come from the nasty rumor mill.

Once we sat down, the regent took his seat again. “Let us begin with introductions,” he began. “I am Lavas Nexalia Langmeier, current regent of Welgis Castle. I’ve taken up the duties of my father, Lord Klein, who has been laid up ill for some time.”

Gourry’s attention remained on Mileena and Luke, who stood behind Lord Lavas. Luke, perhaps also curious, kept shooting looks our way, while Mileena was as expressionless as she’d been the first time we’d met her.

Lord Lavas, whether he noticed the exchanged glances or not, continued talking. “You might not think it to look at me, but I’m quite an aficionado of the magical arts... More specifically, of tales regarding them.” A server came out of the door behind the regent, placed some potage in front of us, and left again. “There are many accounts out there, of course, but the ones I’ve found most intriguing of late are the stories of Lina Inverse.”

“But aren’t most of those stories really bad?” Gourry interrupted.

Hey! Why is that the only thing you pay attention to?! If we weren’t in such a fancy-pants place, I would’ve smacked him one.

The regent winced at Gourry’s words. “It’s true that some of them are what I’d call... unsavory. But the more accomplished one becomes, the greater their

renown—and the more gossipmongering arises to tarnish that renown. I personally believe that negative rumors are only ever half the story,” he said.

He then looked at me and continued, “I hope you won’t take offense when I say that I’ve collected quite the array of rumors about you. I’ve heard you were deeply involved with the power struggles of both the Atlas City sorcerers’ council and the royal family of Saillune. There was also the elimination of an evil cult in Kalmaart, and the defeat of the mighty assassin Zuma. It’s even said that you were party to the razing of the capital of Dils and Sairaag City. All events whose involvement would call for nothing less than a peerless sorcerer.”

Oho... I let out an internal noise of appreciation. *Someone’s done their research!*

“But hearsay is just that—hearsay. So while we eat, I was hoping that you might regale me with some of your accomplishments firsthand. But I suppose I have prattled on, haven’t I? Do enjoy your soup before it gets cold,” Lord Lavas said as he picked up his own spoon.



After dinner, Gourry and I left the castle. We were currently on our way back to the inn.

“Wow, what a meal,” he remarked in satisfaction as we walked the night road together.

“I can’t believe you stuffed your face like that.”

“Well, it was all just so good... Nobles really have it made, you know? But you didn’t seem too hungry yourself. What gives? Did you sneak in three or four meals beforehand ’cause you couldn’t hold out for dinner?”

“Hahh...” I let out an exhausted sigh. “Listen, this isn’t a matter of appetite. Did you completely forget that Lord Lavas might be out to get us?”

“Of course I didn’t. Pretty surprising how he didn’t make a move on us, huh?”

Ughhh...

“Well, what I mean to say is that I was worried the food might be poisoned.”

“What?!” Gourry stopped cold in his tracks like that had only just dawned on him. “Th-The food... was poisoned?!”

“It could’ve been, although I’m guessing it wasn’t since you don’t seem any worse for wear after cramming it down your gullet the way you did.”

“That’s what you’re going by?! You could’ve said something before we started eating!”

“As if! We don’t know for sure that Lord Lavas is a bad guy yet, and you wanted me to cheerily sit down at his table and say, ‘Careful there, big guy, the food might be poisoned’?!”

Why hadn’t I warned Gourry *prior* to arriving at the castle, you ask? If I’m being honest here... it had kinda slipped my mind at the time. But shh! Don’t tell him that!

“If I eat carefully enough, I can at least tell if a dish is empoisoned. But not if I just glut myself.”

“Huh... So that’s why you ate so slow?”

“Exactly.”

“How’d you learn to identify the taste of poison?”

“Eh, no biggie. Just a skill my sister back home made sure I learned back in the day.”

At this, Gourry fell silent for a moment. “I’ve been wondering this for a while,” he finally said, “but what kind of person is your sister?”

“Don’t ask. Please. Just let it be.”

“O-Okay... I won’t pry.” Gourry must have noticed the terror deep in my eyes, because he fell silent again with a shiver.

“Anyhoo, I’m left wondering what that dinner invitation was really all about.” I returned to the subject at hand, hoping to clear the air.

“I dunno. We did all that speculating about what he might be plotting on the way there, but all he wanted was to hear your war stories.”

“Yup. Maybe hearing about me from his bodyguards, Luke and Mileena, piqued his curiosity... Although the timing seems a little too convenient for that, yeah?”

“Yeah. And speaking of, Lina, what’re they doing there? The regent wouldn’t hire those two if he was working with the men in black, would he?”

“Hmm...” I pensively furrowed my brow. Dude had a point. We’d teamed up with Luke and Mileena to fight the men in black over a sword back in Bezeld. Said sword was gone now, but even with the odds out of the picture, I was sincerely doubtful that the black cloaks would be so quick to hire former foes for protection. “Either way, our priority right now is dealing with you-know-who.”

“Fair point.”

Gourry and I exchanged a look as we continued to walk along. Ever since leaving the castle, we’d felt a presence tailing us. If it was a friend, they would have called out to us, so the fact that they hadn’t suggested... trouble.

“Should we make the first move?” Gourry asked.

“Good question. All I know is we’d better not lead ’em back to where we’re staying,” I responded, coming to a stop.

There were no residences or bars nearby. It was only shortly after nightfall, but the streets were already empty of all but darkness and silence. Perhaps realizing we'd halted, the presence behind us seemed to hesitate momentarily before making its next move—coming straight for us!

Light burst forth from the black of night, riding a wave of hostile intent. The light took the form of a magical spear, but it was easily avoidable at this distance. Gourry and I leaped in opposite directions to evade it. But then—

“Huh?!”

Sensing a new wave of danger, I half-reflexively put a hand on my sword. A figure leaped out of the darkness right before my eyes! *Hey!*

Ching! I used the hilt of my half-drawn shortsword to block an incoming horizontal slash by a hair's breadth.

Wow, that was close! If I'd been a second slower, my opponent's blade would've buried itself in my side—or at least liberated me of a finger grasping my hilt. The attack had come way too fast for it to be the same guy who'd launched the spell, though. Were there two assailants?!

“Lina!” As I leaped back, Gourry interposed himself between me and my attacker, his sword drawn.

Clash! The man in black blocked a slash from Gourry with his own blade—one the color of darkness. From the same position, he then launched a spell at the big lug in retaliation! When had he chanted that?!

It should've been a surefire hit at close range, but Gourry managed to twist away and channel his momentum into a follow-up slash. This time, the man in black jumped back to dodge instead of parrying. He took some distance from Gourry, then suddenly turned and bolted.

“Is he running away?!” Gourry shouted.

“No!” I said, giving chase. “He wants us to follow him! He's luring us somewhere!”

“And we're just gonna play along?!” he whined as he ran to catch up.

“Of course! It's an obvious trap, so we're gonna spring it, bust through, and

find our next step!”

“Gotcha!”

Gourry and I darted down the night-cloaked street in pursuit of the fleeing figure. I’d assumed there were two of them, but there was no sign now of a second. Maybe my mind was playing tricks on me... or maybe that was part of the trap. Whatever the case, chasing down this guy would get me my answer sooner or later.

We raced along, turning corner after corner. After a whole lot of running, the man in black finally passed through a certain gate.

“Hey, this is...”

Gourry and I briefly came to a halt, for we were right outside one of the mysterious off-limits facilities we’d scoped out before. It looked a little like a library or museum, but it was walled off and swarming with guards the last we saw... Yet there was no sign of guards near it now, and the gate stood wide open.

“Hey... Lina!” Gourry called.

There, I looked toward the building itself. The man in black we’d been chasing was standing at the front door, staring back at us.

“Got it. The old ‘come and get me’ routine...” I muttered.

“Are we... gonna go and get him?”

“You betcha!” I responded with a wink.

We then renewed the chase. Once the man in black was sure we were coming after him again, he disappeared through the door.

“This guy’s really set on making sure we keep up!” Gourry remarked.

“A sign he’s confident in his own abilities. Or in whatever trap he’s set. Or... maybe both.”

We were soon upon the entrance for ourselves. A faint beam of light shone through the crack in the door, but there was no immediate sign of anyone inside. Of course, we knew someone *had* to be. They were probably just

concealing their presence.

I recited a spell under my breath and signaled Gourry with my eyes. Then —*Bam!*—he kicked the door in, sword in hand! But...

“Nobody home,” he whispered, looking around.

I took a moment and then peeked inside too. A large, circular entry hall opened up before us. At the end was a corridor, and on either side was a staircase leading up to the second floor. Candlesticks lining the walls cast the room in faint magical light. There genuinely didn’t seem to be anyone around. Except...

The opening to the corridor in the back was flanked by two griffon statues, the rightmost of which was shifted slightly from its original position. Below it was a hole in the floor leading into the basement.

“Another obvious trap, I’d say,” Gourry observed.

“Guess we better fall for it, huh?” I responded. “They’ve gone to this much trouble, after all.”

We steeled ourselves as we strode across the room and sallied down the stairs to a hallway below. The ceiling itself seemed to have been enchanted with some kind of magical light, which cast a cold, inorganic glow over the austere, empty corridor.

After we walked a ways, the hallway culminated in a door that just screamed, “Hello there! I’m a trap!” Still, we couldn’t exactly turn back now.

We made it to the door, reached for the knob, and... *Clack*. A chill air washed over us from the room beyond. On the other side of the door was... blackness. The light trailing in from the hall only revealed silhouettes lined along either wall.

“Lighting!” I incanted to brighten the place up. And then... “What is all this?” I found myself whispering.

The room was flanked with crystal tubes as high as the ceiling. Inside of them floated living things, seemingly asleep... Curious creatures that could be called neither human nor monster.

“Say, Lina, what is this place?”

“A chimera factory... and a big one, at that.”

The rows of tubes extended beyond the light of my spell. There had to be a hundred or more.

“Chances the guy in black is farther in?” Gourry asked hesitantly.

“No contest, man.”

The crystal tubes were set into the wall. It would be impossible for someone to hide behind them. Our guy probably intended to lead us deeper in, then release the chimeras from the tubes to surround us. But if that was the game, I had a little plan of my own.

I began to walk the narrow hall between the tubes, chanting under my breath. And before long...

“We meet again,” came a voice as I felt a presence spring up behind us.

I quickly turned to see a figure standing at the door we’d come through, haloed by the light. No prizes for guessing it was a man in black. Of course, given the dress code, I technically had no way of knowing whether it was the *same* man in black...

“Do you remember my voice? It’s me... Zain.”

“Zain?!” I cried out, abandoning my chant.

“Who?” Gourry asked.

“From the whole Bezeld thing! You know, the black cloak who disappeared on us at the very end?!” I shouted. This guy wasn’t a bad fighter, but we could beat him so long as we didn’t let our guard down.

“I heard you infiltrated another of our facilities yesterday,” he said. “I was rather surprised when my comrades mentioned your names.”

“So this city is your home base after all, huh?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Aw, really? You always took the bait before. Kids grow up so fast!”

“Say what you like,” Zain spat indifferently.

Huh, and he used to be so easy to manipulate too... There was definitely something different about him now.

“Either way, you need to die,” he hissed, killing intent now flooding out of him.

I quickly chanted a spell, when just then...

Krrrik-ak-ak-ak! The crystal tubes that lined the hall between us and Zain audibly began to crack! *Crash!* So-called “water of life”—a culture fluid used for making chimeras—gushed forth, momentarily hiding Zain from sight.

The next instant... a hostile presence appeared behind us.

“What?!”

Gourry whipped around. Swords flashed. *Clang!* He skillfully managed to block the man in black’s blade.

I knew it! There were two guys! That meant my job was to pin down Zain, who was still in front of us. But just as I settled on that strategy...

“As usual, not bad,” whispered the man behind us—in Zain’s voice!

What?! I looked back to the door ahead to see that the silhouetted figure was gone. *It can’t be!* Even if he had a secret passageway or something, he shouldn’t have been able to get behind us that quickly!

Nevertheless, we didn’t have time to sort that out right now. The sealed chimeras were now starting to flood the hallway from their broken tubes.

I unleashed the spell I’d chanted on the nearest one: “Freeze Bullid!”

As its name suggested, Freeze Bullid fired a frigid projectile meant to quick-freeze an opponent. The corridor was pretty narrow, so if I iced the one in the lead, it should hold off the others behind it. Yet...

Crash! My spell hit the head chimera, but rather than freezing solid... the creature just shook it off.

It didn’t work?! Did this particular chimera have a little demon in it?!

I didn’t have time to cook up another spell with the monsters barreling

toward me. Instead, I swiftly drew my shortsword and prepared to meet them. I'm not bad with a blade skill-wise, mind you, but I can't deny that I'm lacking in the brawn department. If Chimera No. 1 was a fusion of human and demon, I'd be hard pressed to fell it in one blow. That being the case...

The approaching chimera roared, raised its right hand high, and...

Whoosh! In that instant, I leaped close, keeping low in a crouch so that it might look to the chimera like I had disappeared. I then straightened up, thrusting my sword straight above me!

Krrkkh! The tip of my blade pierced the chimera's jaw from below! It let out a howl curdled by bloody foam, lashing out as it struggled in agony.

I quickly let go of my sword, drew back, and released the spell I'd been working on. "Blast Ash!"

Whoom! The flailing chimera and the one behind it took the spell head-on and turned to ash. See, this little black magic number would cremate anything with life or will—meaning it left my sword and the walls around us unscathed. I scooped up my weapon as it clattered to the floor and readied myself to face the next round of chimeras.

About a dozen were still crowding the hallway. I could beat a couple more the same way, but it would be slow and dangerous going. If only I had access to my good ol' Gaav Flare, which would both affect demons and penetrate multiple opponents... Too bad circumstances had conspired, let's say, to deny me that spell.

If Gourry got a free moment, I could order him to take point while I watched on from the sidelines. But, while I didn't have any time to spare him a glance, I could still hear the clashing of swords behind me. That meant the boys were still busy, so I was gonna have to do something about these chimeras myself! If I could just stymie the one at the head of the pack...

That's it! I quietly began chanting. I held the cautious chimeras at bay with my sword, and then...

Whoosh! The beast in the lead finally decided to charge.

But by then, I'd already finished my spell! "Dynast Breath!"

Shing! This time, the vanguard chimera froze entirely in place.

This spell summoned magical ice capable of freezing even demons, meaning it overpowered any magic resistance the chimeras might have. It usually froze an opponent and then shattered them into little shards... But I'd adjusted the incantation slightly for all freeze, no break. If you truly understood a spell's chant, such modifications were pretty easy to make.

Okay! The other chimeras won't be able to get by the frozen one at the head of the parade, which means I can help Gourry out with Zain now!

I turned around, chanting a new spell.

Clink! Clank! Clang! Their battle was still going strong, as I'd expected. Gourry wasn't taking it easy on the guy either. Zain's slashes seemed to be coming harder and faster than they had the last time we'd tangled with him.

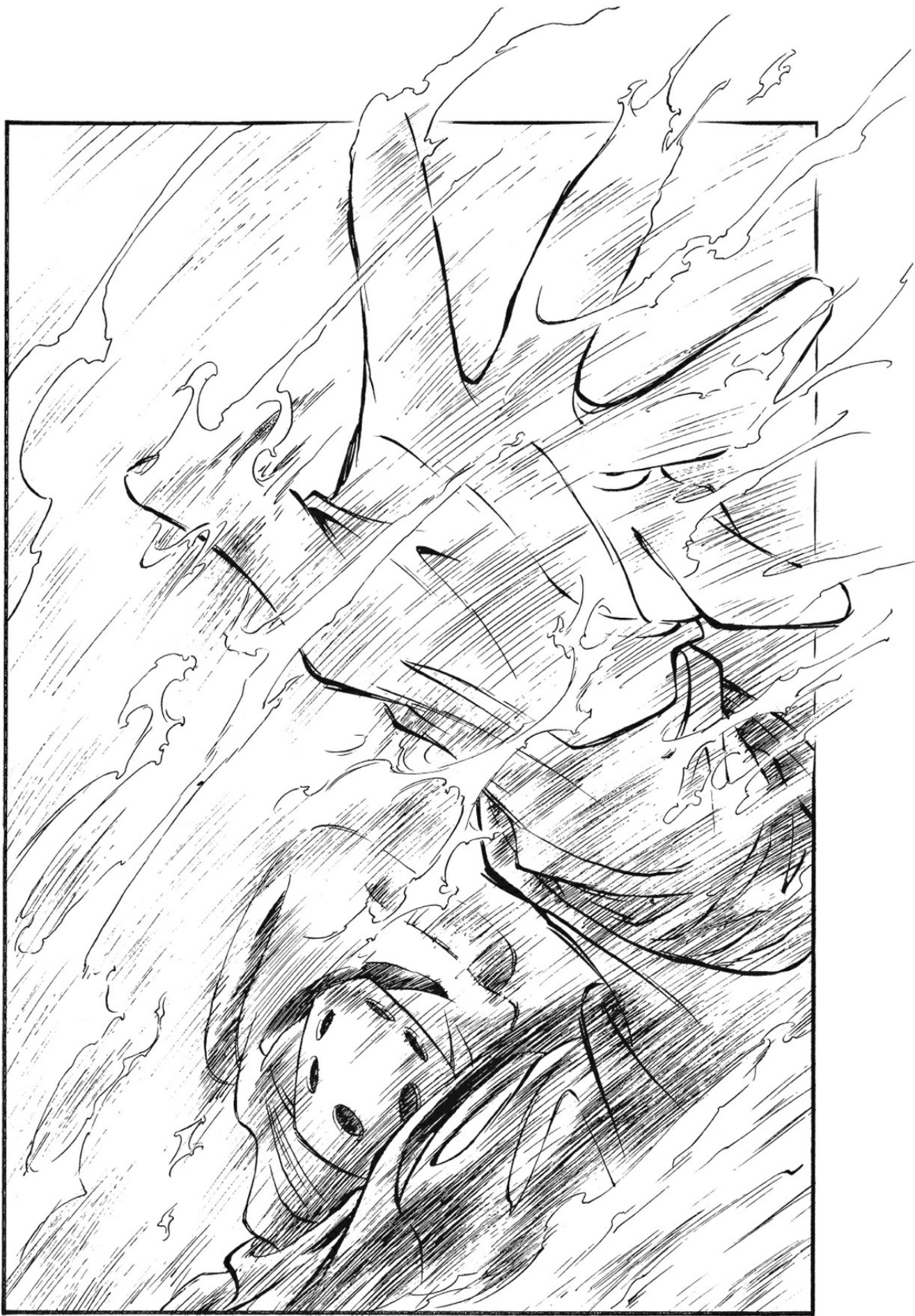
What the heck? How'd he get so much better so fast? Regardless, taking on me *and* Gourry at the same time would be his downfall!

I got around behind the big lug and unleashed my spell: "Flare Arrow!"

A dozen arrows of flame appeared in the air—right between Gourry and Zain!

"What?!" Zain shouted in surprise as the fiery bolts rained down on him.

Fa-fwoom, fwoom, fwoom!



Conjured Flare Arrows ordinarily manifested in front of the caster, but I'd made a little modification to this spell too. *Okay! Now let's bust up those chimeras and...* I turned around, only to see...

"Bwuh?!" Gourry cried out in shock. The din of clashing swords followed. As for who'd attacked him, it was none other than...

"Sorry, little girl, but that won't work on me!"

"Zain?!"

For a moment, I couldn't believe my eyes and ears. His black clothing was clearly covered in scorch marks, but there was no sign of damage to the man therein. Had he anticipated my attack and cast a fire protection spell?! Or...

"Oh, damn!" Zain abruptly called out in fright before I could finish my thought.

Even as he continued to trade blows with Gourry, his eyes moved to me... No, behind me! I turned back, still wary of any sudden movement from Zain, and saw the vanguard chimera still frozen in place. I couldn't see anything amiss, but...

Oh, of course! The chimeras that had been crowding around behind the frozen one were nowhere to be seen, meaning... Wait, had they just up and left?! Was our buddy in black *not* in control of them?!

Realizing that the sound of swordplay had ceased, I looked back toward the boys in time to see Zain leap away. He put a wide berth between him and Gourry, then whipped around and dashed off into the darkness.

"Luring us again?" Gourry whispered.

"Doubtful!" I shouted back in response. "I think the chimeras got out, and all hell's about to break loose in the city!"

"Whaaat?!"

I quickly cast a spell. "Dynast Breath!"

Shing! This unaltered version pulverized the frozen baddie, and beyond it... just as I feared, there was nothing but an empty corridor. The chimeras that had

been swarming behind it were long gone.

“What should we do, Lina?!”

“What else? If the monsters really have escaped topside, we can’t just hang around here! We’ve gotta get back up there and see what’s happening!”

I took off without waiting for a response from Gourry, who obediently followed behind. We ran back through the corridor, made a beeline for the top of the stairs, and found ourselves in the entrance hall once more.

“There!” I cried when I spotted a chimera standing up ahead. It noticed us and let out an intimidating roar, but before I could chant a spell...

Vwoosh! Gourry dashed out in front of me and slashed through the beast.

Gourry, you rock! If only you weren’t as dumb as one!

“Was that the chimera you were talking about?”

“Yeah, but he’s got buddies too.”

“How many in all?”

“I can’t say for sure... There should be about ten more, I think.” I couldn’t see any others nearby. There might have been some wandering around elsewhere in the building, but if any had gotten outside, they had to be our top priority.

“So let’s get out there!”

“Right!”

Gourry and I burst out the front door, and...

“Geh!” I stopped with a groan. The fight had already spilled beyond the compound walls, out into the city streets.

“I just don’t get it,” I commented to Gourry, who was waiting at our table, as I returned to the inn.

Last night, we’d managed to defeat all the chimeras running rampant in the city, make it back to the inn (acting as if nothing had happened), and get some shut-eye. But after breakfast this morning, I’d gotten curious about the status quo, so I’d headed out into town to run some recon.

“You don’t get what? You mean nobody’s talking about what happened last night?”

“Well, of course people are talking. There was an official statement and everything. Said it was the handiwork of a rogue sorcerer on the run, but that the culprit in question had already been apprehended.”

“What’s that mean?” Gourry asked, scowling.

“It means that the black cloak faction has suppressed the truth.”

They probably wanted to keep things on the down-low here in their headquarters city. They even seemed to have lent a hand last night, as Gourry and I had stumbled across a few already-slain chimeras during our rounds. I mean, no surprise the black cloaks didn’t wanna publicly admit the real cause of the chaos, but...

“But still, they easily could’ve blamed all the trouble on you and me. They control the authorities and the flow of information, after all. But they didn’t—that’s what I don’t get.”

“Hmm...” Gourry scratched his head, puzzled.

“Want me to explain it to ya?” came a new voice.

“Huh?” I looked over to see a familiar face. “Luke?!”

Indeed, it was Luke, the black-haired warrior with the sour face. He’d appeared at our table at some point, sans Mileena for once.

“Hey,” he said bluntly, taking an empty seat. He was scratching his head awkwardly. “I ain’t a fan of this messenger boy crap, but ya can’t say no to a client... This is why I hate hired gigs.”

“That’s a lot of griping from a guy who approached us. And what kind of mercenary hates hired gigs?”

“Who’re you callin’ a mercenary?! Me an’ Mileena are treasure hunters!”

“Really?”

“Yeah!”

As the title suggested, treasure hunters sought out ruins and the like for loot

to sell at a profit. Most folks would say that's not much different from what Gourry and I did, mind you... But whatever floats your boat as far as labels are concerned, I guess.

"Come to think of it," I said, "you guys got involved in the whole Bezeld drama because you were after a sword, right?"

"That's right! We hunt down storied treasures, surmount trials to find 'em, and then seize 'em for ourselves! A real life of adventure! I ain't no mercenary waggin' my tail for some bored rich jerk."

"But you're wagging your tail for Lord Lavas right now."

"Waaaaah," Luke suddenly bawled, sobbing in response to my comment. "L-Look... I ain't workin' for that guy 'cause I wanna be! I just..."

"You just... ran out of money?"

"No way! I just... Mileena took the job without even askin' me!"

"You could have turned *her* down, y'know."

"You stupid or somethin'? I could never turn my sweet Mileena down!"

"For all your big talk about adventure, you're pretty gutless when it comes to her..."

"Hmph. I'm a slave to my love!"

Or you're a slave, period...

"A slave to love? Come on, man..." Gourry said with a wince. "I think she's just got you whipped, is all. It's sad to see a man fall so low."

"As if you got a leg to stand on," Luke said, glaring at me and then at Gourry.

"Hang on, it's not like that. Lina doesn't have me whipped at all. It just looks that way because I don't like thinking for myself."

Sheesh... How you live your life is up to you, granted, but this is... It's just pathetic, both of you...

"So, anyway..." Realizing this train of thought was only going to get *more* depressing, I cast a glance at Luke. "Back to the subject at hand, what are you doing here? You made it sound like you've got some insider knowledge."

“Oh, right, yeah.” He snapped back to himself at last, glanced around cautiously, then whispered, “You know the chimeras that were all over town last night?”

“We’ve heard rumors.”

“Don’t play dumb. The regent thinks you were involved. He’s the one who covered it up.”

“Oh?” I asked, keeping my own voice hushed.

“Yeah. He wants your help.”

“Hmm.” I thought for a minute. “This wouldn’t happen to be... some kind of familial power struggle, would it?”

“Heh. Good call,” Luke responded with a grin.

Not that it was especially hard to figure out. If there were two parties in conflict and one was a regent, it was reasonable to assume that the other was of comparable standing. A blood relative was the most likely candidate.

“So get this,” Luke began. “Lord Lavas’s got an older brother named Veisam. He’s pretty ambitious, and he ain’t satisfied with bein’ in charge of one measly territory. So he starts plottin’ all kinds of rotten stuff. An’ now that their old man’s fallen ill, he’s left runnin’ things to his little brother while he takes advantage of the money and power.”

“Brothers, huh?”

“Yeah. But if what the older one is doin’ gets out and the king hears about it, he’ll strip ’em both of their rank an’ titles. They could even end up with their heads on pikes. So Lavas’s doin’ what he can to stop his brother as quietly as possible. That’s why he needs strong people on his side. One of the spies he sent to keep tabs on his brother reported that you guys were in town, so he wants to hire you.”

“I see...” I remarked. It certainly added up.

“But that’d all be down the drain if you got arrested over the chimera business, so Lavas cooked up a story to feed the public and sent me to fill you in. Now, here’s where I ask: you wanna help the regent out?”

“Hmm...” I scratched at the back of my head thoughtfully. “If you don’t mind my asking, Luke, have you ever met this Veisam guy yourself?”

“Nah, no way. They say he ain’t in the castle no more.”

“I see. I’ll pass, then.”

“Got it. I’ll let ’em know.” Luke nodded easily and stood up.

“H-Hang on! You don’t want to know why I turned you down?” I demanded. It was apparently my turn to lose my cool.

“I told you that I hate this messenger boy crap,” he said in annoyance. “What you do ain’t no business of mine, so it don’t much matter to me *why* you do it.”

“Mileena’s going to be mad that you didn’t ask.”

That sent a full-body twitch through the self-proclaimed treasure hunter. He then sat back down. “W-Well... maybe I oughta hear you out after all.”

“Man, how whipped does she have you?”

“C-C’mon, out with it already.”

“Nah.”

“...”

“...”

“Hey now...” Luke said, rubbing at his head hard. “Are you messin’ with me or somethin’?”

“Kinda!”

Luke was at a loss for a response.

“But there *is* a good reason I’m not telling you,” I offered. “And now that you’ve inquired, you can tell the regent and Mileena, ‘I kept asking and she just wouldn’t say.’”

“Got it.” There, Luke stood up with a scowl and made his exit.

“Hey, Lina, why’d you refuse?” Gourry asked once he was out of the building. “It seems like the regent’s in real trouble.”

“That’s assuming Luke... rather, that the *regent* is telling the truth,” I

explained. “I mean, the setup all sounds legit, but that doesn’t mean it actually is. For example, what if their positions are reversed?”

“Reversed?”

“Maybe the regent’s the one plotting the nastybads while the older brother Veisam is trying to stop ’im. Maybe Veisam fled the castle because his brother tried to kill him, and the regent wants to hire us as a distraction—or even to finish the job. Either way, we need to figure out what’s what before we take sides. Moreover...”

“Moreover?”

“You remember the masked man who jumped in when the black cloaks were after us two nights ago? Who the heck was he?”

“Don’t tell me... it was Veisam!”

“Doubtful, but...”

“We’ve seen royals acting as crusaders of justice before. Nothing weird about a noble lord putting on a mask and jumping up on walls, is there?”

“Huh... You got me there.”

“Right?”

“Anyway, our top priority is still getting to the bottom of all this. In other words, it’s time to ask around!”

“Say, Lina,” Gourry called out.

“What?”

“I’m starting to think that sneaking into the castle, even if it is to get to the bottom of things, might be a tiny bit reckless,” he continued in a whisper.

For, you see, we were currently both hiding in the shadows dressed in black clothes and black masks. Indeed, after an eventful day, we’d decided to infiltrate the castle in the dead of night. I cast a glance down the dark road to see its spires silhouetted against the moon and stars.

“C’mon, don’t wimp out on me!” I hissed. “When I suggested sneaking in, you

were all for it!”

“I don’t remember you saying we were sneaking into the *castle!*”

“Of course not! I didn’t tell you that part!”

“Okay, right...” Gourry whispered in exhausted response.

Earlier in the day, after Luke had slunk off, I’d gone around questioning the locals and learned a couple of things. First, there was indeed a man named Veisam in the lord’s family. Second, Lord Lavas was new in town. The citizens had never heard of him until recently. Could it be a bastard son situation? Word on the street suggested as much.

But more importantly, people were saying that Veisam’s disappearance, the lord’s illness, and the sudden mysterious facility boom in the city center all coincided with Lavas’s arrival. That seemed like a pretty big red flag. Of course, the idea that the appearance of a bastard brother had spurred Veisam to begin pursuing his own foolish ambitions wasn’t one I could rule out...

I guess, in a way, we hadn’t actually learned much relative to the amount of walking around we’d done. Our goal was to figure out which brother was the bad egg, help the other one come out on top, then take a couple magic swords and a couple hundred gold pieces as a reward. That meant we needed to sort out the intrigue ASAP.

“But Lina, will sneaking into the castle really tell us what we need to know?”

“Dunno.”

“Come on...”

“Well, it’s a lot more likely to yield useful information than sneaking into those other facilities at random. Take the one from yesterday. It had a hidden staircase and a bunch of chimeras in the basement, but that’s not proof of a rebellion—and it certainly doesn’t tell us which of the two brothers was behind it. But if Lord Lavas is the one plotting an insurrection, the castle’s the best place to find evidence. For instance... if we’re found sneaking around in the castle and the men in black attack us.”

“That’s even more reckless!”

“It’s just one example. It’s not like I’m gonna get us caught on purpose,” I protested.

“I sure hope not. But if we search the place and find nothing, does that mean the missing brother is masterminding the rebellion and not the regent?”

“It could just mean that Lavas is cautious as hell. Either way, let’s get going already.”

I took Gourry’s hand and began chanting a Levitation spell.

Infiltrating the castle itself wasn’t hard. I did my usual—levitate us over the outer wall and land on the roof of the main building. I then cast an Unlock spell on the skylight of an empty room and slipped inside. The real work was yet to come.

If the regent *was* the mastermind and there *was* proof, where would it be hidden? Security outside wasn’t too heavy, but there would probably be patrols in the castle itself and watchmen at key locations. It wouldn’t be easy to slip through all of them and uncover the truth.

I mean, ideally we’d stumble upon a bad guy monologuing about his evil plan to his flunkies like in the old heroic sagas, but... you know.

Hmm... Where would I hide my incriminating evidence? I stood in the moonbeams streaming through the skylight for a while, my head pensively cocked to the side. “Okay,” I whispered softly. “I know what we’re after.”

“What?” asked Gourry.

“We’re gonna pay the bedridden lord a visit.”

“Hey now...”

“Security will probably be tight, but we can learn the whole story if we find him.”

“You really think he’s gonna tell us?!”

“Depends on how we broach the subject. I have an idea, though. Leave it to me.”

“Well... if you insist.” Gourry sounded hesitant but seemed to accept my assurances.

While carefully scanning for nearby sounds and presences, Gourry and I opened the door and set out.

“Hey... do you think we’re maybe going in the wrong direction?” Gourry whispered after we’d stealthily scuttled a ways down a dim, empty hall.

Upon leaving the room we’d come in through... Well, we’d started our search, but the place was just crawling with patrolmen. We’d gone from lighter security area to lighter security area, but all we’d found so far were boring places that probably didn’t see much use. The corridors here were almost pitch black, with only the occasional sconce on the wall and absolutely zero guards.

“Maybe, sure... But what recourse do we have?” I whispered back.

“Why don’t you put the guards to sleep with your magic?”

“Y’know, Gourry, for how much you call me reckless, that’s a pretty reckless suggestion. Even if I did put a soldier to sleep for us to sneak by, another soldier would come along soon enough, find his passed-out buddy, and sound the alarm. We’d have to tuck tail and run with nothing to show for it.”

“Yeah, but still... wandering from empty room to empty room isn’t getting us much either.”

Ack! Surprisingly keen insight from the big lug!

“F-Fair... So, okay, let’s go somewhere else!” I said, setting off once more.

If we retraced our steps, we’d be backtracking into a patrol unit. The route ahead seemed safe enough, so I figured we’d continue on while looking for alternative paths. We thus darted around in the dark at random for a bit, and then...

Gourry and I stopped in our tracks at the same time. The hall we’d been following for a while suddenly split in two. Off to our right, I could feel human presences.

If people were around, you’d think they’d have lights with them... yet the

corridor in question was just as dark as the others. The word “ambush” popped into my head, but I didn’t get any sense that these folks were trying to cloak themselves.

Hmm... I stood there in the darkness pondering the situation. If someone was here, surely it was for a reason. It was unlikely that another party of intruders just happened to be invading at the same time we were, and even if that was the case, they wouldn’t just be standing around like this. The lack of hushed voices probably ruled out a clandestine meeting too.

What could it be, then? Curiosity began to gnaw at me.

Welp, time to find out! If we just strode over there, then the persons in question were bound to notice us. But fortunately, there were no patrols around, which opened up my options somewhat.

I recited a spell under my breath. “Sleeping!” Within moments...

“Ugh... Mm...”

“Mrrgh...”

I heard a set of soft groans from down the corridor, in the direction of the presences, followed by the sound of people hitting the floor.

Okay! I signaled to Gourry and we advanced together. We turned the corner to find two guards, collapsed under my spell, in front of an unassuming door. Given its location and rickety appearance, I would’ve guessed it was a broom closet. But who in the world would put guards on a broom closet?

“What’s in here?” Gourry asked quietly.

“Dunno. No idea what they’re protecting all in secret like this... but the best way to find out is to see for ourselves,” I said, reaching for the knob. It wasn’t locked.

Wreeeeek... The door opened with a slight squeak. The air inside was stagnant. At the center of the room was a single lamp casting a dim light over the walls and an old canopy bed. On it lay a frail old man. He showed no sign of stirring upon our entry, just let out the unsteady sounds of sleep unique to the bedridden.



But... what was a sick man doing here? If he was quarantined, there wouldn't be any guards on the room...

"Hmm?" I sensed something in the man's countenance and approached. I took his pulse, inspected his skin, and smelled his breath.

"Hey, what're you doing, Lina? What can you learn from prodding at that old guy?"

"That he's been poisoned, for one thing."

"What?!" Gourry breathed.

"By the kind you feed someone little by little. That's the cause of his current condition. He was poisoned and thrown in an out-of-the-way room with two guards posted at the door, which means..."

"Which means...?"

"I can't help wondering if this is our 'sick lord.'"

"W-Wait a minute!" Gourry shouted in a panic. "If this old man is the lord... what *does* that mean?"

"It means Lavas is spinning lies," I said softly.

If, as Lavas has said, Veisam was the one plotting an insurrection, then the younger brother had no reason to poison the lord and shut him up in this cheap old room. Presuming this old man was the lord, anyway. To make sure of that... the fastest way to find out was just to ask him.

I put a hand on his shoulder and gently shook him. I didn't want him waking up and making a fuss, but I knew how to keep him calm. We'd just say we were scouts from the king sent to investigate rumors of insurrection. That way, drawing attention wouldn't be in his interest. Of course, that cover was all just a big lie, but a certain princess I knew would have said, "All's fair in the name of justice!" Probably, anyway.

Regardless... I never got a chance to put my plan into practice. I shook the old man over and over, but he showed no sign of awakening.

"Guess that's a bust..." Rather than simply sleeping, he must have been

enervated into a coma.

“What should we do now?” Gourry asked.

“We need to get out of here.”

“I’m all for that, but what then?”

“Good question. Why don’t we wake up one of the guards and ask them? If this old man is the real lord, that means Lavas is the one usurping his position to raise a military force.”

“I see. Let’s get to it, then.”

Gourry and I exited through the door, back into the hallway. There...

“Hey, you two!” cried a familiar voice.

Geh! I didn’t know what the hell they were doing here, but I looked up to see... Luke and Mileena.

3: Battle Breaks Over Solaria at Night

“Who’s there? Don’t move!” Luke drew his sword and dashed straight at us.

Whaaa?! Gourry and I reflexively ran in the opposite direction!

“Don’t try to get away, you bastards!” he shouted as he gave chase.

A pretty absurd request, if you ask me. When a guy charges you with a sword, you get the hell outta there! Granted, I’ll admit that we looked pretty darn suspicious under the circumstances. Faces covered, dressed all in black... and while we weren’t armored, we *were* armed. All that, plus two guards collapsed by the door? It was no wonder Luke was after us.

The question now was how to handle the situation. Should Gourry and I peace out, or reveal our identities and explain ourselves? The answer came to me easily enough—*Let’s book it!*

With Luke’s shouting and carrying on, there were bound to be other guards on the way. And amidst all the coming kerfuffle, we’d never get a chance to tell our side of the story. We were just gonna have to make tracks for now and get back in touch tomorrow to lay out the sitch. Now, as for how best to make our getaway...

I chanted a spell under my breath. “Dam Blas!” Then I whipped around and unleashed it!

Crash! Just as I’d planned, the blast broke through the ceiling between us and Luke, raining debris down to block their way.

“What?!” Luke backed off to avoid the shower.

Meanwhile, I chanted another spell, took Gourry’s hand, and... “Lei Wing!”

I used that to take us out the hole in the ceiling and land up on the roof. I theoretically could have just kept going, but Lei Wing’s speed, altitude, and carrying capacity all varied greatly based on the magical power at the caster’s disposal. With Gourry in tow, it took all my concentration just to get us this far.

My Demon Blood talismans would let me tote him with ease, but I hadn't had time to cast the amplification chant with Luke on our heels.

So I waited to cast it until now, as we reached the edge of the roof.

Hail, Lords of the four worlds' darkness

I beseech your bond and beg you this boon

By your powers combined, entwined,

Bless me with magic mightier than mine

And with that one little recitation, the Demon Blood talismans on my neck, both wrists, and belt buckle began to shine. I could feel their power filling my body. I then started chanting a new Lei Wing. When I did...

"Get back here!"

Luke and Mileena appeared on the roof too, probably courtesy of a Levitation spell.

Man, talk about persistent!

Luke darted toward us, but just before he could close the distance, I finished my chant!

"Lei Wing!" With far greater speed than the last time, Gourry and I took flight and fled into the night sky. Now, once we shook these guys off—

"Lina! They're after us!" Gourry shouted.

"Whaaaaaaaat?!" I couldn't help screaming. "You gotta be kiddin' me! First those men in black, now Luke and Mileena?!"

"Guess your spell isn't all that fast..."

"Yeah, right! There ain't a sorcerer around with a spell that can keep up with this baby!"

"Except them, I guess. Oh, I know!"

"You know what?!"

"Last night, your spell didn't work on the man in black either. Must be that time of the month!"

“It is not!” I barked.

Gourry was right that I’d failed to defeat opponents I should’ve trounced and outrun opponents I should’ve left in the dust... But my magic wasn’t compromised in any way. The speed of my Lei Wing just now and the force of the Dam Blas I’d used on the ceiling earlier were up to snuff. That meant we had a different problem on our hands—our opponents were more powerful than usual.

A normal Lei Wing could never keep up with my amplified one. But one with an artfully altered chant? An enhancement like that might get the job done. It seemed Luke and Mileena had quite a few tricks up their sleeves... I’d have to ask ‘em about it later. For now, however, our top priority was getting them up to speed.

I flew out to one of the city’s meandering walls some distance from the castle, touched down in an unpopulated area, and dismissed my flight spell. Not long after, Luke and Mileena followed suit. It looked like Luke had been pulling Mileena by the hand through the air, but I suspected both could use Lei Wing. If you combined two spells just right, maybe you could boost their effectiveness. But all that aside...

Hang on, you two! I wanted to cry, but before I could... a ball of magic appeared in Luke’s outstretched hand! *Oh, for the love of...!*

“Prepare for pain, assholes!” Luke shouted and released the orb. It broke up in midair, sending countless small glowing bullets showering down on me and Gourry.

“Gwaaaah!”

Pow! Powpapow! Gourry and I split as they rained down around our feet. They didn’t seem particularly powerful on their own, but I wasn’t anxious to taste one.

“You ain’t gettin’ away from us!”

“Hold your freakin’ horses, darn it!” I shouted, turning back toward Luke as I pulled the cloth off of my face. “It’s me! It’s us!”

“What the...?!” Luke stopped, understandably surprised, while Mileena

observed us as stoically as ever. Had she already figured us out, perhaps?

“It was you guys?!” Meanwhile, Luke seemed absolutely flabbergasted, suggesting he definitely hadn’t. “Finally turned to dirty dealings, did ya?!”

“Why would you assume that?!”

“Shut up and eat this!” Luke extended his hand, another ball of light forming in it...

“I’d advise you to hear them out!” a familiar voice boomed out, interrupting him.

“What?!” Luke called off his attack, looked around, and froze when he saw something.

I followed his gaze and spotted a silhouette standing on a roof near the wall. It was the masked man again!

“You there, raven-hair. Are you doing this with full knowledge of Lavas’s plot?” the masked man boomed again.

“What?!” Luke stammered, looking shaken by the accusation. “Lavas’s plot? What’re you talkin’ about?!”

“Lavas is leading the men in black we fought in Bezeld!” I threw in this time.

“For real?!”

“We’re not sure yet! That’s why we snuck into the castle!”

“For your information, Lavas’s plot does not stop with merely amassing forces...” The masked man glanced around him. “But it seems I’ve no time to explain.”

I heard a rustling on the wind and suddenly felt presences appear all around us.

Of course... Luke and Mileena weren’t the only ones who’d followed us. The figures that came into view, rising up out of nowhere like moonlight taken form, were the all-too-familiar men in black. More than ten of them, at that.

“Beware,” said the masked man, his eyes cautiously scanning their ranks. “Several of these men are fused with demons.”

What?! I looked back at Mr. Mask in shock. And I wasn't the only one taken aback.

"You... Who are you?! How much do you know?" one of the men in black demanded anxiously, lending credence to the man's declaration.

But it made perfect sense! That explained how Zain had gotten so much stronger than before, and how his buddies had kept up with my amplified Lei Wing. They had demonic power now!

Still, if that was the case, it was hardly good news. What I'd witnessed so far (these guys quick-casting spells and blocking them barehanded) didn't mean they'd been sneaking chants past me somehow; it meant most magic didn't work on them at all.

"Take the masked man alive. Kill the others."

On the lead man's order, the other black cloaks sprang into action. One of them jumped up on top of the wall, produced a spear of light in his hand, and let it fly. His target? The masked man on the roof!

But the masked man just calmly and quietly brought his right hand forward. "Vas Gluud." As if he'd expected the black cloak's play, he created a magic barrier the size of a small shield. *Plink!* It dispersed the spear of light effortlessly.

"What?!" The man in black froze for a second, shaken.

Ah, never let your guard down, as they say! I'd already finished chanting my spell. "Blast Ash!"

Vwsh! Before he could even scream, the man in black on the wall turned to dust.

"Don't underestimate them!" spat one of the men in black. It sounded like Zain! "I'll start with you, Lina Inverse!"

With that, Mr. Probably Zain came straight for me! Still, he had a lot of ground to cover, and I could chant pretty darn fast! I completed my next spell before I was even in his sword range.

"Blast Ash!" I aimed it right where I expected him to run. About the only spells

in my repertoire with a fairly wide area of effect that would *also* work against targets with beefy magic resistance were this and Dragon Slave—and I couldn't go chucking Dragon Slaves in the middle of a city.

My Blast Ash caused a black something-or-other to wreath any swath of air I targeted. The dark field would expand and then disappear, reducing any opponent caught within it to ash. I watched as it encircled Zain, and when it disappeared, I saw... nothing.

“Lina!”

The second Gourry cried out, I felt a chill run up my spine and immediately leaped forward.

Whoosh! Something brushed by my back. I quickly took my distance, turned around, and saw a man in black standing there, sword in hand. There was no way it was reinforcements. The men in black already had us surrounded. Which meant... this could only be...

“He... He just came out of nowhere!” Luke shouted, confirming my theory.

“Is that your power, Zain?!” I demanded.

“It is,” he responded quietly.

Just as I thought. In the moment I'd cast my spell, Zain had warped behind me in an attempt to sneak in a backstab. The ability to blink through space... That explained his impossible moves in our battle last night as well. It was something I'd seen powerful pure demons do from time to time. But to see a human do it, even if he was fused with a demon... That'd only be possible by combining the magic power he'd acquired through the fusion with a certain degree of innate magic skill as a human. That added up to a tricky opponent.

I'd so narrowly dodged his blow that it had caught the edge of my clothing, but I might not be so lucky the next time. If the masked man was to be believed, Zain wasn't the only one with a deadly trick up his sleeve either. And that was all without acknowledging that these guys had us outnumbered two to one, which wasn't the best of odds even if they'd been normal humans. Yeah, this was gonna be a tough fight.

While we were panicking over the reveal of what Zain could do, the other

men in black began to close in. *If the five of us could work together, then maybe...*

But just as I was thinking that—*Tnk!*—the masked man suddenly leaped from his roof to the top of the wall. With another jump, he then vanished into the adjacent block.

That little sucker ran off on us! I wasn't the only one distraught over his actions. Zain also let out a cry of surprise, briefly stopping in place.

"Raza Clover!" In that instant, Mileena unleashed a spell.

Zain leaped up and dodged it with ease. "You four, after him! The rest of you, finish them off here!" At his behest, several of the men in black disappeared over the wall in pursuit of the masked man.

Aha... The black cloaks' priority was pinning down the masked man and what he knew. Him fleeing the scene had taken some of the heat off of us. But even so, we were still outnumbered. We'd have to approach this carefully.

Zain, who'd remained on our side of the wall, dashed straight at me again!

Clink! Two flashes of silver clashed, a metallic ring resounding through the air. Gourry had dived in to parry Zain's blow before it could reach me. Then, as if intent to finish their business from the night before, they launched into a fierce back-and-forth.

Too bad I didn't have time to stand around and watch it. The remaining men in black set upon us immediately. I drew my sword, on my guard for the first one charging at me. Needless to say, I was also chanting a spell!

Shing! I blocked the incoming strike just as I finished my spell. "Freeze Arrow!"

Fwsh! Responding to my words of power, a few dozen bolts of ice manifested in front of me. A normal casting of this spell would summon about a dozen, but this puppy was amplified!

"Wha?!" Clearly terrified by this, the man in black leaped back.

"Go!" I fired my spell into the densest part of the black cloaks' ranks.

Fshhfshhfshh! Countless streaks of light audibly tore through the air. It was

such an overwhelming ice storm that there was no way to dodge it all, even if you were fast.

“What?!”

“Gwah!”

Were those screams of shock, or pain? Either way, I heard quite a few and saw two men collapse. Ice magic probably wouldn't work on the demon-fused guys, but quite a few of the black cloaks seemed to be plain ol' humans, and my goal was to sift out a few of their number. Fortunately, my plan had worked perfectly. I started my next spell...

Clank! Clang! I could hear the ringing of metal on metal directly behind me. At some point, Mileena had moved to stand back-to-back with me, her sword drawn. Beyond her, some distance away, two men in black had thrown something at me—maybe knives—which she'd knocked out of the air. The men's hands were raised like they were about to throw something again...

“Fight like men already!” Luke shouted as he swung his sword. *Whoosh!* A burst of wind from his magical blade sent the men in black flying.

And as if she'd been waiting for just that... “Fell Zaleyd!” Mileena incanted, unleashing a swirling bolt of white light that mowed one of them down!



Their teamwork was seriously amazing. Apparently intimidated by how quickly we'd dispatched so many of their buddies, some of the men in black looked hesitant... but others yet were still raring to go. Were they just that cocky, or was this the confidence their demonic powers afforded them? It was safe to assume that, despite thinning their numbers, we still had quite a few formidable enemies left to face.

So... what if I do this?! I released the spell I had at the ready.

"Fireball!" Normally, this baby exploded on contact, but I'd tweaked the chant a little bit.

"Break!" I snapped my fingers, and then... *Fwoobababoom!* High above my head, the Fireball burst, creating crimson flowers in the night sky.

Two days ago, the masked man had forced the black cloaks to retreat just by hinting at the commotion their battle might cause. So what if I *intentionally* made a scene here and now? I was betting it'd chase them off again.

"Damn it! This ain't no time for playin' around!" Luke yelled at me, none the wiser to my plan. It certainly gave the black cloaks pause, however...

All but one of them.

"Graaah!" The man who refused to be cowed charged at Mileena with a bestial howl. With the force of a berserker, he piled on attack after attack.

"Tch...!" Barely managing to deflect the strikes, Mileena was slowly being forced back.

"Hey! Lay off my Mileena!" Luke bellowed, moving in to support her (and sneaking in some shameless self-promotion in the process).

"I'm not yours," Mileena objected, as cool as could be despite the danger she was in.

I was chanting a spell in the meantime, natch. I would've liked to offer Gourry or Mileena a little magical backup, but I couldn't really do much while they were locked in melee combat. Too great a chance that I might hit one of them.

Should I work on picking off the rest of the black cloaks, then? I went to release my spell and... that was when I heard an unexpected shout.

“What?!” cried an old man on the side of the road—probably a local attracted by all the ruckus.

“Tch...” Zain looked rather disturbed and leaped back from his clash with Gourry.

Yes! Success! If we could draw a big crowd, the men in black would be forced to retreat!

Or so I thought, except the man in black attacking Mileena didn’t react the same way. He did break away from their skirmish, but...

“You’re in my way,” he said casually. His left hand flashed.

“Geh!” The onlooker let out one final shout as he hit the ground with a thud.

What the...?!

“What are you doing, Zord?!” Zain reproached him.

“Getting rid of a witness!” the man called Zord responded with unsettling glee. “Anyone who interrupts our battle must die!”

“Are you insane?! You just made things worse! He won’t be the only one who comes!”

“Then I’ll kill all of them!” Zord said, his left hand now flashing... in my direction!

Sensing a danger that I couldn’t put into words, I jumped to the side. An unseen blade severed a lock of my hair.

My beautiful tresses! How dare you?!

But this was no time to be petty. This was probably the same move he used to kill that innocent old man. I’d thought it was a throwing knife at first, but I hadn’t seen anything moving through the air. My hair was there one minute and simply gone the next.

An invisible shockwave, then... Zord must have produced one the size of a knife when he flicked his hand.

This is so not cool! I decided. Watching Zord’s movements and dodging when he seemed about to attack was going to be the only way to deal with it. But

with other enemies around, I couldn't afford to focus solely on him. In other words, we were gonna have to finish him off first!

I released my next spell, another Blast Ash, even knowing how easily these guys could dodge it! *Don't get caught up in this, Mileena!*

"Blast Ash!" I aimed straight at Zord's back.

He must have realized it was coming—either that or he had good instincts—because he ran forward to avoid it. When he did, though, Luke leaped in! *Vwoosh!* With a magnificently timed sweep, he cut deep into Zord's side.

Yes! Now we just— But my celebration was premature. Zord immediately swung his own sword right back at Luke, with a speed that suggested he was totally unfazed by his gaping wound.

"Huh?!" Luke managed to block the strike despite his surprise. "How in the hell...?!"

"Wahaha! You'll need more than that to kill me!"

H-Hang on a minute now! This guy's tough as freakin' nails! If we don't beat him fast, we're in trouble! Yet before I could make my next move...

"Withdraw!" thundered Zain.

The other men in black immediately pulled back. Everyone except for Zord.

"Zord!" Zain scolded.

"Go on if you want to! I'm not done here!" he replied in a crazed tone.

Word to the wise: Don't give crazy dudes superpowers. Or... was his madness a byproduct of the demon fusion?!

"What will *he* think of your insubordination?!" Zain shouted.

Twitch! That threat seemed to register with Zord. He quickly jumped back, got some distance from the group, and hurriedly said, "F-Fine! I'm sorry!"

Huh? He seemed completely docile now.

"Let's go."

With Zain's second order, the men in black at last all disappeared into the

darkness. Zain withdrew with them, leaving the four of us to a growing crowd of rubberneckers.

“Anyway... we’d better get going too,” I said.

“Indeed.” Mileena nodded in response. “We should head somewhere we can have a quiet talk.”

“Aha... so that’s the deal,” Luke whispered grumpily, sipping his cup of wine as I finished my story.

After the men in black had retreated, Gourry and I slipped back to our lodgings, picked up our luggage, and got some distance from the walled-off central block of the city. We’d then made our way to this inn-slash-tavern (which seemed weirdly rundown despite not actually being that old) in a burgeoning outer district. The houses here looked like they’d been built willy-nilly with no actual attempt at city planning, giving the place a real “wrong side of the tracks” vibe. The joint was packed with seedy and suspicious characters too—the perfect hiding spot, if you ask me.

“So can we say for sure that the regent’s in league with the guys in black?” Luke now asked.

“Seems like it to me, yeah,” I replied as I took a bite out of the salmon sandwich I’d ordered off the late-night menu.

“Tch. He really pulled the wool over our eyes, huh?” he said in frustration.

Mileena interjected calmly, “Not *ours*. Just yours.”

“Huh?” Luke looked stunned at this. “W-Wait a minute... I thought you trusted the regent, Mileena.”

“Why would I? I’ve never liked redheads.”

“W-Well... that’s kinda prejudiced, if you ask me...”

“Weren’t you the one who took the bodyguard job?” I had to ask. I was pretty sure that’s what Luke had told me.

“I was. But I had my reasons.” The silver-haired sorceress then began to explain in her ever-calm voice...

Many nights ago in a city not too far from here, Mileena—fed up with Luke’s incorrigible lovey-dovey overtures (her words)—decided to leave their inn and take a stroll. While she was out, she encountered a man who claimed to be a servant to Lord Langmeier of Solaria. He said the lord had been usurped, and that his entire family might be killed if nothing was done. He was allegedly on the way to report the situation to the king himself, and he was looking for protection for the journey.

Mileena had turned him down. Not because she hated mundane errands (unlike our whiny buddy Luke), but because she doubted the man’s story. This was entirely understandable, of course. Who comes crying to a random merc on the side of the road—that they haven’t even hired yet, no less—about how their lord has been usurped? Mileena figured it must have been some kind of scam.

But the next day, when she found that same man dead on the street, she had to wonder... *Could* he have been telling the truth? Had he unloaded on her out of desperation, knowing his pursuers would catch up to him soon? Was it a last-ditch effort to ensure that the knowledge didn’t die with him? Mileena had come to Solaria to find out for herself.

“But if the regent’s got the men in black, why hire you guys?” Gourry asked skeptically as Mileena wrapped up her tale.

“He’s probably the opportunistic type,” she replied, taking a sip of brandy-infused tea. “I wanted to stay at the castle a bit longer to investigate, but of course, things have since changed.”

“Ah, so you were investigating too when you stumbled across us, huh?” I mused when it dawned on me.

Mileena nodded silently.

“There was a man laid up in that room we broke into,” I shared. “He’d been drugged.”

Twitch. Mileena’s eyebrow arched slightly.

“I’m assuming... that he was Lord Langmeier.”

“So he really did get usurped,” Gourry remarked with a frown. “Wait, then who’s this Lavas guy really?”

“Our enemy—I can tell ya that much,” Luke said as simply as ever. “But the one I’m wonderin’ about now is that masked guy. Just who is *he*?”

“Well... probably not our enemy, at least,” I offered.

“You sure about that? What if he’s an agent of the king, who’s just usin’ us to keep Lavas busy? Or what if the lord’s other son, Veisam, got out alive and this dude’s workin’ for him, huh? That’d explain how he knows so much. If that’s his angle, he might play nice as long as we’re handy... and then throw us to the wolves once Lavas is gone.”

“Fair enough. We won’t slot him in the ally column just yet, then.”

“The smartest thing to do, if you ask me,” Luke said, with a glance at Mileena, as he scratched his head, “is to say bye-bye to Solaria, give the king a heads-up about what’s goin’ on here, and leave the rest to him.”

“You can do that if you like. But I won’t be going with you,” Mileena said harshly.

“Mileenaaa...” Luke whined, turning teary-eyed.

“Can I ask a question? What should we do next?” Gourry asked, wincing in anticipation of my expected reply.

Far be it for me to disappoint him, I delivered with a bright smile. “The same thing we do to anyone who picks a fight with us, be it cat or bird or regent lord!”

“Then it’s decided,” Mileena said, expression unchanged.

Luke smiled through a grimace. “So we wait for things to quiet down and strike back?”

“Oh, don’t be such a wimp,” I said, rising to my feet after polishing off the last of my sandwich. “We strike right now—while the iron is hot!”

Solaria that night was as busy as I'd ever seen a city. That was to be expected, given that there'd been trouble two evenings running. The site of our last battle was packed with onlookers, as well as guards marching this way and that to investigate the scene and keep traffic moving.

We gazed down at it all as we flew overhead through the darkened sky. We were backtracking to the temple-like building that Gourry and I had infiltrated on our first little mission, but there were a few key differences now. For starters, we had a bigger party... And more importantly, this was no stealth operation. We were going to pick a fight this time.

I figured there had to be a pretty important facility under there, see... Possibly a facility creating demonoid humans like Zain and Zord. We needed to find it and crush it.

Of course, the quickest way to wrap this whole business up would actually be to head to the castle, tie Lavas up, and beat a confession out of him. In fact, that *was* my original plan, but Mileena had poo-pooed it. It was clear that Lavas was our prime suspect, but we still didn't have solid proof against him yet. She was concerned that if we came for Lavas and it turned out he wasn't the mastermind after all, we'd be up a certain creek without a paddle.

(My thinking was that a little "Teehee, whoopsies! Wrong guy!" would be enough to cover our asses in just such a situation, but Mileena had poo-pooed that too.)

Hence we'd shifted our sights to the facilities in the heart of the city. Whether or not Lavas was behind them personally, it was clear that they were important to the men in black. Striking one might enable us to put a dent in their forces, and if things went *really* well, we might even be able to identify their ringleader and bag some evidence of the rising insurrection.

It was also possible that Zain and his goons were busy reporting to their boss right now, so they might not even be around. It was highly unlikely that they were expecting a reprisal from us so soon, which meant security on the facility should be fairly light. Talk about a golden opportunity!

"There it is!" I whispered quietly—"it" being the temple-esque building with the domed roof.

I shepherded our group closer. Because of the darkness of night and the distortion of our wind barrier, it was hard to be certain, but it sure seemed like there were fewer guards than last time. The four of us touched down on the roof.

“Mileena, put up a wind barrier,” I said.

“Why?”

“Sound dampening.” She caught on quickly, chanted the spell, and conjured a wind barrier surrounding us. As for me... “Dam Blas!”

Crash!

The attack I unleashed broke through the floor at our feet with a big boom, but Mileena’s wind barrier muted most of it. We then levitated down into the building through the hole I’d made. It was as dark inside as it had been on our last visit, but this time, we didn’t have to keep quiet. Just as I was about to chant a light spell...

Wham!

“What is it?!”

“Who are you people?! Hold it right there!”

The outside door flew open and security forces poured in, rabbling at us.

“No fair!” I cried. “We muffled the sound!”

“They could still hear the rubble falling, dumbass,” Luke whispered in response.

Ah... fair point. Our wind barrier prevented sound from leaking out roofoise, but it didn’t do much about the debris hitting the ground below. That had, um... probably made quite a lot of noise, in fact...

Welp, whatever! No use crying over spilled milk, right?

I quickly chanted a spell, got around behind the pews, and turned toward the approaching soldiers. “Sleeping!”

The crowd collapsed with a frankly comical *thump-thump-thud*. The fact that they’d all gone off to dreamland so easily suggested that there weren’t any

demonoids like Zain and Zord among them.

More soldiers kept coming, but Mileena and I put most of 'em to sleep with more magic. Any that managed to get through were quickly knocked unconscious by Gourry and Luke. Soon enough, we had a cathedral packed with snoozing soldiers, and no more reinforcements to go.

There had been two men in black present here last time, but maybe they'd been sent out to find us and weren't back yet. Maybe they were lying low for some other reason. Or maybe they were hiding in the main facility underground, just waiting for us...

At any rate, I cast another spell. "Lighting!"

Pop! The light I threw up toward the ceiling hung in the air overhead and illuminated the room around us. Lines of pews, a central walkway... and at the head of everything, a rather grand altar with a divine statue behind it. The building could certainly be used as a real place of worship. If not for all the security, I would never have pegged it for a front.

There was probably a hidden door somewhere around, but we didn't have time to search it out the old-fashioned way. I began chanting under my breath... "Dam Blas!"

Crash! My amplified blast tore through the floor below! And beneath it was... dirt.

"Tch. Not here, huh?" I was hoping to hit the jackpot on the first blast. I began chanting again.

"Hey... you're not gonna keep blasting the floor until you find a way down, are you?" Gourry asked in disbelief.

But of course I wasn't. I placed a hand on the exposed earth... "Bepheth Bring!"

This was a burrowing spell I used to create a long, narrow tunnel through the ground. My thought was that if I cast enough of these in various directions, we'd eventually connect to the underground facility. But I didn't even have to run a second chant. There was already light at the end of my tunnel.

“Found it.” The facility seemed to be hidden pretty far below. I cast another spell to widen the hole, and then... “Actually, scratch that.” I’d been thinking about using Levitation to take us down, but I changed my mind and switched to a different incantation. Right down the tunnel, I sent a... “Fireball!”

Fwoosh! Once the flames in the depths died back, Luke and Mileena levitated down through the tunnel. Gourry and I followed suit a second later.

We found ourselves in a straight, empty corridor with white walls, partly charred black by my Fireball. I’d shot the blast in the event that there was an ambush waiting for us inside, but there were no enemies in sight. The sound would probably bring them running soon, though, and knife-throwing enemies in a narrow place like this would probably make short work of us. In other words, we needed to get a move on!

I chanted another spell, and... “Dam Blas!” I fired at one of the walls based on nothing but a gut feeling.

Crash! And... pay dirt! I’d opened a huge hole that revealed a vast room on the other side. I darted in without looking and...

“Wh-What?!” There were a total of five sorcerers inside. They cast flustered, fearful gazes my way.

Now, I pegged them for sorcerers, but based on their appearance and bearing, these guys looked the research kind rather than the casting kind. And they weren’t the only people around.

Well... “people” might be putting it loosely. There were several dozen chimera-growing crystal tubes in the room. And suspended in the so-called water of life within... were probably the fruits of their human-demon fusion experiments. Men who seemed half human, half lesser demon. Women with twisted bodies below the neck. And... children, equally deformed.

It was clear that none of these once-human creatures had volunteered to be part of this.



“You sons of...!” Luke raged, grabbing the collar of the nearest sorcerer.

“Ah! Ahh!” One of the sorcerers on the other side of the room reached for the knob of a door when...

Thump! Luke’s sword was suddenly sticking out of his back. The sorcerer fell limp and slumped to the floor.

“I kill the next guy who moves,” Luke said in a low voice, making it clear how serious he was. The sorcerers all froze in place. He turned his eyes back to the guy whose collar he was holding and said, “Tell me everything or I start breaking fingers. You still don’t talk, I kill you and move on to the next guy.”

His eyes were dead serious. He seemed like he’d really do it if we let him... And after seeing what was inside those tubes, none of us were inclined to stop him.

“F-Fine! I’ll talk!” Realizing that silence wouldn’t save him (or perhaps just because he was a coward), the sorcerer readily capitulated. “They’re... They’re making us run experiments here! Experiments forcing humans into becoming hosts for demons summoned from the astral plane!”

Hmm? The sorcerer’s words tickled something in the back of my mind.

“We study what happens if you use humans who haven’t yet developed a strong sense of self—children—as hosts, their differences in stamina, compatibility... external appearance when using men versus women, adults versus children...”

“I don’t give one damn what you’re studyin’,” Luke hissed, interrupting the man’s terrified ramblings. “Who put you up to all this?”

The sorcerer hesitated for a moment, then said, “L-Lord Lavas.”

Aha!

“Got it. So it’s the regent who’s orderin’ you to do these disgusting experiments on folks.”

“I... I was just following orders! I-It wasn’t my fault!” shouted the sorcerer, refusing all personal responsibility.

“Oh?” A dangerous expression flashed across Luke’s features. “I’m bettin’ the women an’ kids in there didn’t ask for any of this. You’re sayin’ you bear no part of that ’cause it was an order? So it’s okay if I kill you on someone else’s orders, huh? It wouldn’t be my fault, right?”

“Wha—”

A shudder ran through the sorcerer’s body. Gourry and I gasped. I didn’t know where he’d been hiding it, but Luke had produced a dagger in his free hand and plunged it into the man’s chest.

Whud... His neck released from Luke’s hold, the sorcerer collapsed to the floor.

“That’s too far, Luke,” Mileena said calmly.

“Don’t you see what they’re doin’ here, Mileena?!” he responded angrily, uncowed for once. “He said he was ‘just following orders’! These assholes don’t even think what they’re doin’ is wrong!”

“We have more pressing concerns at this particular moment.”

Luke gritted his teeth at Mileena’s words. “Seeing this crap... It’s enough to make a guy hate the whole of humanity...”

“I’m human. As are you.”

Her words seemed to release some of the tension in Luke’s shoulders. “Yeah... I guess. So what do we do with the rest of ’em?” He glanced at the remaining sorcerers, who suddenly huddled together in fear. And then...

“Sleeping!” The spell I incanted sent them all into slumber. “Why don’t we just leave them here for now?”

“Fine,” Luke said bitterly. He still seemed infuriated, but he was above killing men in their sleep.

“Quit worrying about these maggots. Now that we know Lavas is calling the shots here, it’s time to go beat his ass! We can see that these guys get their just deserts later.”

“But... I don’t think we’ll be able to leave just yet,” Gourry said, peering through the hole in the wall that led back out into the corridor.

“Enemies?!”

“Yeah. Incoming.” He drew his sword while keeping his eyes on the corridor. “I can’t see them yet and they’re masking their presences, but... I think they’re surrounding us.”

“You can tell all that?” Luke looked at Gourry skeptically.

The rest of us couldn’t sense squat, but Gourry had a kind of bestial instinct that, as far as I knew, had never been wrong. Now, if the enemy had us encircled, what was the best way to respond?

I know! I quickly began chanting a spell under my breath.

“Okay, let’s do this! I was lookin’ for someone to vent on!” Luke, taking the news of an ambush *extremely* well, marched toward the door and yanked his sword out of the dead sorcerer. Just then...

Crash! The door came flying off its hinges—probably the work of a Dam Blas from the outside. Gourry had been right!

In that same instant, I erected a wind barrier on the knocked-in door with the spell I’d been chanting. *Whoosh!* It wavered and swelled, streaked with the colors of fire. Someone outside had chucked a Fireball at us!

In other words, the enemy’s plan had been to blow in the door and follow up with a Fireball to finish us all off—including their own sorcerers who were trapped in the room with us. They’d probably also set this up so that if we’d jumped through the hole in the wall opposite to escape fiery death, we’d get pincushioned by throwing knives from men lining both sides of the hallway. The reason for their delayed attack was to give them time to close the snare. Too bad for them that Gourry’s instincts were so sharp!

The second the fire died down and I released my wind barrier, I turned and saw Gourry leaping out the door. Luke and Mileena looked at each other, nodded, and followed after him. I was about to do the same... but a flash of inspiration hit me. I chanted a spell to set up a little trap before leaving.

When I caught up with the others, I found them in an even larger room than the one we’d come out of. It had to be a laboratory, lined as it was with strange devices I didn’t recognize and more crystal tubes. And as expected, there were

about ten men in black inside. Maybe they'd let their guard down, assuming they'd finished us, or maybe they were just kinda crummy in a fight, because by the time I made it through the door, two of them were already on the ground.

Intimidated by Gourry's skillful swordplay, one of the men in black drew back, and...

Swish! Suddenly, another man—leaping out from behind an empty crystal tube—flew at Gourry from the side, his sword swinging! He'd have to do better than that, though!

Gourry took a half-step back, putting a small bit of space between him and the closer man, then pivoted on his left foot. He channeled his momentum into a slash at the man's stomach, and when he slumped forward, Gourry kicked him into the incoming ambusher!

The ambusher reflexively caught his comrade's body, and when he did... Gourry took the opportunity to cut them both down together.

While all that was unfolding, Luke and Mileena worked together to take down another black cloak, and I finished my spell... *Kra-kash!*

"Wah?!" came a cry of distress behind us with a crash.

Ha! Got 'em!

"Fireball!" Whipping around, I fired the spell I'd chanted at the men caught in my pit trap!

Fwoosh! Needless to say, they had no way to dodge it. They took the explosion head-on and were fried head to toe.

This had all worked out thanks to the little trick I'd taken the time to set up earlier. Assuming that the guys in the corridor would come swarming in, I'd used a Bepheth Bring on the ground in front of the hole in the wall in the previous room to dig myself a pit. I'd then left some flooring on top of it—just enough to crumple immediately if someone stepped on it. The men in black in the hallway, realizing that the earlier Fireball hadn't done the trick and sensing fighting deeper within, must have charged in in a panic.

Unfortunately, I'd probably only taken out a fraction of their number this way.

More would likely be coming from that same direction soon. That meant I should leave the lab fight to my friends while I picked off the enemies pouring in from the rear! Fortunately, there didn't seem to be any of the fused demons in the group so far, but they could still show up at any time. I had to thin the crowd while I had the chance!

"Blast Ash!"

Vwmm! The spell I unleashed cleared out the next couple of black cloaks appearing from the hallway. Of course, if I limited myself to this pattern, the next one would probably just toss a Fireball or some other projectile into the room. Which meant...

I chanted another spell. Then, almost as if he'd waited for me to finish, another man in black appeared beyond the broken wall. An orange ball of light was already in his hand.

I knew it! Since I'd seen this coming...

"Fireball!" he shouted.

"Diem Wind!" I incanted in the same breath.

Our spells activated simultaneously. A normal Fireball, with no extra bells and whistles, was an orb of light that exploded on contact with a blast of flame. The orb in flight, however, wasn't powerful enough to push through my Diem Wind.

The man in black flinched. He probably hadn't been expecting his Fireball to come sailing back at him. Even if he processed what was happening and tried to flee, he wouldn't get far amidst the gust my spell produced. As a result...

Ba-bwoom! The Fireball fried its own caster.

Okay! That should keep the guys in the hallway at bay!

But as I was chanting my next spell, I felt a wave of hostility rising up nearby. And then, suddenly... a dark figure appeared in the corner of the room.

The ability to blink through space...

"Zain?!"

"Sorry I'm late."

The figure in question, possessing the power of both human and demon, zeroed his attention on me.

4: The End of a Lost Kingdom's Dream

Brr! I felt a chill run up my spine. I was in real trouble here.

Zain was close. I wouldn't have time to chant a spell. No sooner than I opened my mouth to chant, he'd leap into sword range and slice right through me. I probably couldn't out-fence him, and escape was out of the question. The second I turned to run, I'd get a blade in the back for my trouble.

My best hope was Gourry and the others picking up on my predicament and coming to my aid, which left me with only one recourse in the moment—buying time!

"I see... You're the only one with the ability to blink through space, then?" I asked.

"You're free to think that, if you wish," Zain responded coldly. (Which was fair. It would've been weirder if he'd responded cordially.)

"If there were others with the same ability, they'd have shown up with you. Strength in numbers, right? But the fact that they *didn't* means that they *can't*. I'm gonna go out on a limb and assume you've all got shared basic properties like magical resistance and simple no-chant spells, and then each one of you has a little something special on top, right? You can teleport, that Zord guy can create shockwave blades without incantation... et cetera."

Zain remained silent, refusing to take the bait.

"Boy, you really have changed. Is that the demon fusion at work?"

"No," he whispered quietly, his voice filled with rage and hate. "It's because I learned the name of the person who destroyed our kingdom."

The person who destroyed his kingdom? I was about to scowl in confusion, but I held my face steady. The way he was going on made this sound like a buildup to a classic "It was you, Lina Inverse!" reveal. But not even *my* magic could wipe out a whole kingdom. Still, if I hinted that I was about to respond with a classic of my own—"Dunno what you're talkin' about!"—in a sweet li'l thing voice,

he'd probably rush me on the spot.

"It was after the Bezeld incident that I learned of it... and it was then that I decided to forsake my humanity." Zain's aura of malice swelled.

Would you guys freakin' catch on already? Gourry, Luke, Mileena! Someone!

"Now..." Zain whispered, almost as if to steel himself, then made a slight movement.

He's coming! I thought. But just as I braced for it...

"Lina!" Gourry burst through the door and flew to my side. But it didn't seem like he was rushing in to save me. "You've got your hands full too?!"

"Too?" I asked.

Before Gourry could even respond, Luke and Mileena entered the room, backing toward us as if cornered. Luke cast a glance our way.

"More on this side, huh?" he spat out. Which meant...

"It seems our reinforcements have arrived," Zain said.

As if on cue, more men in black appeared behind him, beyond the broken wall. There were five or six of them in total.

Zain turned his cold eyes on me. "You thought you were delaying me long enough for your comrades to arrive... but I was buying time for reinforcements as well."

Geh! We were totally surrounded now.

"Galzard," Zain called.

"Sir," one of the men in black standing just outside the broken wall responded.

"Throw a Fireball into the room. Don't be afraid to hit me too."

"Sir."

"What?!" the four of us called out at once.

"Carmine, a barrage of Freeze Arrows. Jake, a Dug Haute. Release them all on my signal," Zain continued to order.

I heard someone start to chant from beyond the wall, and someone else behind the door. *Not good!* I didn't have a defensive spell strong enough to protect us from all of those puppies at once, and Zain's presence would keep us from finding cover without posing any risk to himself. He was taking pretty clever advantage of his demonic magic resistance.

"Not so fast!" Gourry charged the men at the door. But...

"Diem Wind!"

"Grh!"

A spell from one of the black cloaks kept him at bay. And just as the others finished their chants...

"Blast Ash!"

Fwom! The men past the hole in the wall were all annihilated in one hit.

"What?!" Zain turned back, aghast.

"Pardon the intrusion. I thought it might be time for a showdown, is all." Walking slowly to where the men in black had just been standing... came the masked man.

"You!" Zain hissed.

"Oh, calm down. What kind of self-respecting royal guard has such a short temper?"

Oho? "Royal guard"? The mention of those words sent a note of panic running through the black cloaks. And just then...

"Arc Blas!"

Crackle, crackle, crack! The spell Mileena shot over her shoulder zapped the guys clustered around the door. It was an area-of-effect lightning number that wouldn't kill in one hit, but rather would paralyze its targets and render them briefly immobile.

Next up... *Whoosh!* Luke ran at the men in black and felled them one after another.

"Most would call this 'the tables turning,' wouldn't you say?" the masked man

said airily.

At the very least, we only had Zain left to contend with now. He was no slouch, mind you, but there were five of us and only one of him. Pretty good odds for our side!

“Who *are* you?” Zain whispered, his eyes locked on the masked man. He seemed to be shaken more by the callout than by the loss of his comrades.

“If I said I was your fellow countryman... would you understand then?”

Zain chuckled. “Aha. Of course...”

“Someone wanna fill me in?” I asked.

The masked man replied flippantly, “Do you perhaps recall a country named Ruvinagald?”

Ah! Ruvinagald... That name snapped everything together in my mind. The Ruvinagald Republic was a country on the edge of the Alliance of Coastal Nations. Most people knew that it had been a monarchy until a few years ago, but very few knew the reason for the royal family’s dissolution.

You see, the kingdom had embarked on some secret research. That is, using humans as hosts for demons. Their objective was to strengthen their army through the mass production of demidemons that could be controlled by people other than just their summoning sorcerers. To serve as guinea pigs, they kidnapped people with an underdeveloped sense of self—in other words, children—and summoned demons from the astral side to possess them. This horrific plot was easily crushed by me (in pre-Gourry times) and a few others. This, in turn, led to the royal family’s evil deeds coming to light.

I hadn’t kept abreast of what went down afterward, but I’d heard rumors that when other countries caught wind of the incident, the Ruvinagald monarchy was dissolved and the country was reestablished as a republic. But what if the royal family behind the plot hadn’t learned their lesson? What if they’d just gone underground? The Solarians said that Lavas had appeared out of nowhere... What if he was reviving his old ambitions here, even bigger than before? That would also explain Zain’s comment about how I’d destroyed their kingdom.

In other words, Lavas hated me. It was misplaced resentment since, if you ask me, he was just reaping what he'd sown... but I wouldn't expect a guy trying to fuse humans and demons to be the self-reflective type. The fact remained that he hadn't resorted to the easiest method of getting rid of me and Gourry (putting a bounty on our heads to drive us out of town), however. He'd even gone so far as to try to hire us. Why? Probably to keep us close at hand for our inevitable slaughter. As for why he'd hired Luke and Mileena... it could have been mere caprice. Or a similar desire for revenge over the whole Bezeld debacle. I couldn't be sure either way.

"I see you've finally caught on," the masked man said, a smile in his voice as he noticed my expression.

"I'd say so, yeah. The only thing I can't figure is how he got in the lord's good graces."

"The man calling himself Lavas is a distant relative of Lord Langmeier. I suspect he offered him asylum."

"Impressive intelligence," Zain whispered, confirming the masked man's words.

"Despite appearances, I'm known to the local ladies as the sharpest inspector in the land."

"I see... That explains why you were hiding your face like a freak, even after coming so far to pursue us," Zain continued.

"There are many of our brethren here. Some will likely recognize me. And if you'd known who I really was, you likely would have focused your efforts on me rather than them," the masked informant said with a glance toward us. "To be honest, I was struggling to find hard proof, so I'm grateful that their meddling brought out your true colors."

What am I, your stalking horse?!

"Heh." Zain chuckled at his words. "Then I suppose it's time for a showdown indeed." With that, he immediately began chanting a spell.

Not that I was gonna let him get away with it! I unleashed my own spell, which I'd been chanting while they were talking. "Blast Ash!"

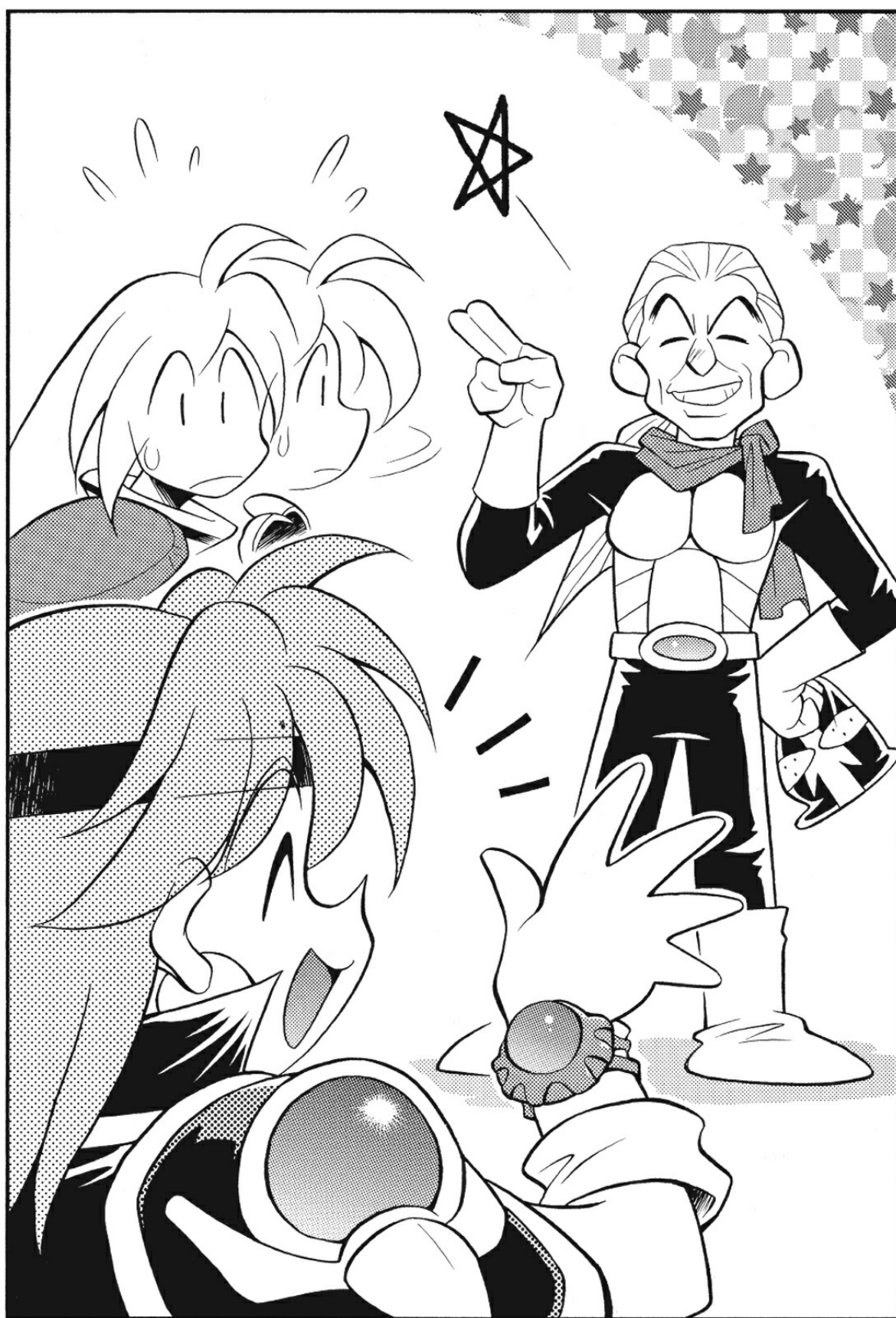
“Void!” But a split second before it hit, Zain vanished. My spell struck empty air where he’d just been standing.

More blinking?!

“Where’d he go?” I asked, scanning all around me.

“To the castle, most likely,” the informant responded. “To report to Lavas about us.” There, he reached for his mask. “Sorry for the delayed introduction.”

Behind the mask was the face of a man in his early forties, with short, brown hair and a stern but distinguished countenance. One that I recognized, natch.



He rummaged around in his pocket and eventually produced a pendant with a crest on it. “I am Wizer Freion, inspector for the Ruvinagald Republic. I’m pursuing its former king, Belgis, and his royal guard for illegal magical experiments... Just as you surmised, Lina Inverse.”

“I see. So that’s Lavas’s real name. It’s been a while, old man. You really are pretty strong, huh?”

“You know this guy, Lina?” Gourry asked.

“A little, yeah,” I answered with a wink. He was one of the people I’d worked with to bust the operation in Ruvinagald. “I’ll tell you the whole story some other time. For now, let’s get our butts to the castle!”

The city that night was totally silent as the five of us quietly walked the empty streets toward the towering castle. After the immediate commotion died down earlier, we’d tied up the (living) sorcerers still snoozing in a corner of the room despite all the ruckus. We’d then set out for the city center. I was expecting some resistance along the way from the men in black, but we had yet to detect any.

This was all feeling... not super great, honestly. Zain had probably reported the evening’s events to Lavas, which meant the lack of attacks thus far indicated he was concentrating his forces in the castle. Forces which included demonoid fusions.

“Hmm...” I hummed, still walking. “Seems to me it’d be pretty easy to just blow away the whole castle with a Dragon Slave from here. Whaddya think?”

“No way!” Gourry shouted, apparently thinking I might be serious. “The real lord is in there, remember? And probably a lot of soldiers who are just following orders without knowing any better!”

“Yeesh, chill out, man. I was just joking, okay? Though I wouldn’t have minded if someone gave me the go-ahead...”

“You mean you’d do it if they did?!”

“Well... uh... Anyhoo, the big question on my mind is what happened to the

lord's real son, Veisam."

"It stands to reason that he's dead," Mileena replied, as monotone as ever. "The lord himself is still useful to Lavas. He could shift responsibility to the old man if things get hot, for instance. But Lavas would have had no such reason to keep Veisam alive. In fact, he was probably the first to be killed."

"What difference does it make?" Luke said, coming to a stop. We all did the same, for we'd arrived at the castle gate. "It don't change what we're here to do—beat the crap outta that Lavas asshole."

Fwooom! An indiscriminate boom disrupted the dead quiet of the night. The oak planks of the wooden gate scattered like scrap paper in the face of my amplified Dam Blas. We then floated over the not-so-wide moat with Levitation and descended into the castle grounds.

I know what you're thinking. "If you could levitate, why smash the gate?" Silly reader! Did you forget that we'd come to pick a fight? It's best to open with a bang! Unless your opponents are especially clearheaded or just way out of your league, scaring the pants off of 'em is a sure path to victory!

"Wh-Who are you people?!"

"Where'd you come from?!"

Guards began to gather in a panic, apparently none the wiser to what was afoot. There were about ten of them in all—none of which were our old pals, the guys in black. These dudes were just an appetizer before the main course.

Okay! Time for a little warm-up rampa—

Before I could get off my spell, Luke and Mileena dashed in and... "Sleeping!" All the soldiers were out like lights.

Seriously, guys, that was... anticlimactic. What was I supposed to do with my chant now?

"Look! Above us!" Gourry's voice rang out.

Above us? I looked up like I was told, and... just managed to keep from shouting. Standing atop the outer walls and castle roof were dozens of men in

black. Their hands were outstretched, crimson orbs of light forming in them—
Fireballs!

Of course! Their plan had been to fill the courtyard with ordinary soldiers to mask their own presences. Then after waiting for us to reach the center of the courtyard, they were all going to fire at once... even if it meant killing the collapsed soldiers in the process.

“Fireball!” came a chorus of incantations. Burning balls of light rained down on us en masse.

They were going to firebomb the entire area! There was no way to escape it. At least, there shouldn’t have been. But luck was on our side! The spell I’d been casting happened to be...

“Bom di Wind!”

Whooooosh! My words of power conjured a massive gale. I had originally meant to blow the soldiers away with the explosive blast of wind this spell conjured, but I’d now released it overhead instead.

Krakakrakroosh! The fiery orbs scattered, buffeted by the wind. My spell had knocked them all off course, sending them in various directions... and exploding on impact. Several of the men in black were blown away in the ensuing firestorm, while all we felt was a slight prickle of heat against our skin.

Before the flaming winds could fully die down, the five of us made a dash for the main castle’s front door.

“Hah!” With a cry of exertion but little actual effort, Gourry tore through the oak planks with his sword.

“Don’t let them escape!”

“After them!”

The men in black on the castle wall jumped down into the courtyard and poured toward the entrance after us. I know they were panicking over the fact that we trashed their super cool trap and all, but seriously, guys! Think for a minute!

Pwash! Fwoosh! Pah! Mileena, Wizer, and I unleashed a one-two-three punch

of Blast Ashes at the men in black rushing toward us. Polished 'em off with no problem.

But we barely had any time to catch our breath. The guys on the roof would soon be pouring inside to head us off. I was hoping to get straight to the Lavas-punching, but there was just one holdup—we had to find the guy first!

“Luke! Mileena! Do you know where the audience chamber is? Take us there!”

“The audience chamber? How come?” Luke asked suspiciously.

Heh. He still knew so little about people!

“Isn't it obvious? That's probably where Lavas is!”

Wham! When we kicked in the door, we were met with a long, narrow room flanked by lines of stone pillars. A red carpet extended ahead of us, and at the end of it...

There sat a man, not a hair out of place. He had about twenty men in black around him. It was hard to believe he'd keep any in reserve at this point, so I assumed those present represented Lavas's total local fighting force.

“Oho,” the man on the throne murmured in interest. “You arrived from the front gate faster than I expected. You must have come straight here.”

“We did. I knew you'd be here,” I said, then took a smooth step forward.

“Oh? Do tell me, then. What gave me away?”

“What else?” I pointed straight at Lavas. “Cheap little villains like you love this kind of drama!”

My insult caused an air of hostility to flare among the men in black.

But Lavas himself simply flashed a cold smile. “Cheap villains, eh? Call me whatever you like... You know nothing about me.”

“Which suits me just fine.”

“Any further conversation is pointless, then.” He rose from his throne and snapped his fingers. The men in black fanned out, forming a wall between us

and Lavas. “I’ve paid my respects, so I needn’t waste any more time here. I shall continue my research underground. You lot handle the rest,” he said, and turned right around.

“You won’t escape!” Wizer shouted, rushing after him.

With that, the battle began.

“Freeze Arrow!” Mileena, rushing into combat a second after Wizer, released a pre-chanted spell.

Several of the men in black swiftly moved to dodge, creating a slight break in their formation... which Wizer charged right through!

Swsh! His sword now drawn, he sliced through any of the men in black who hesitated, then dashed onward in pursuit of Lavas.

Dang, not bad for a middle-aged man!

Still... I felt a pang of anxiety. It was about why Lavas had holed up in the audience chamber. What was his game really? The answer was obvious if you thought about it.

He saw no further benefit in holding back against us at this point, so he wanted to concentrate as many black cloaks as possible in one spot. Within the castle, the only places fit to hold dozens of people were the courtyard, the entry hall, and here in the audience chamber. So rather than hiding away in a closet before the battle started, Lavas had decided this would be the safest place for him. That was the real reason I’d assumed he would be here. My little joke earlier was just meant to provoke him... But he hadn’t taken the bait.

In other words, Lavas might’ve been a weird sadist, but at least he wasn’t stupid—and he probably still had a few tricks up his sleeve. I wanted to go team up with Wizer... but the men in black standing in our way weren’t going to let that happen.

Gourry was fighting two black cloaks simultaneously. They slashed at him in turn, but Gourry deflected both sets of attacks with speedier swordplay. There was a second clash, then a third, and one of the men suddenly lost his balance

with Gourry's parry.

Gourry didn't miss the opening. With an upward slash, he cut through... I was about to say the man in black, but instead, Gourry leaped back and swung his sword through the air next to him.

Fwish! A small sound rang out from seemingly nothing.

"Ohh?! You can cut through them, eh?" one of the men in black said from afar in an almost gleeful voice—it was Zord!

Shing! Luke blocked a strike from above with his sword. As he did...

Slash! Mileena, slicing up from below with hers, cut open the off-guard black cloak's stomach. She then channeled her momentum into a strike at another. Just as their swords collided...

"Bram Blazer!" Her spell knocked her new opponent down. In that moment, a silver flash came at her from the side.

"Dam Blas!"

Clink! Just in the nick of time, Luke's spell pulverized the silver needle streaking toward her.

"You son of a..." he hissed, glaring at Mileena's attacker—another man in black.

Silver claws grew from each of the guy's fingertips for a full set of ten. *Tink-krackle!* When they touched together, sparks danced between them. Were they metal claws enchanted with some kind of lightning spell?

"Another guy who went an' threw out his humanity, eh?" Luke whispered, then smiled boldly.

Meanwhile, my shortsword drawn, I took a defensive stance and began chanting a spell. But before I could finish it, a dark figure appeared before me. Zain again!

Shing! I just barely blocked his blade with mine, but his empty left hand continued to sail toward me. This was no ordinary punch, though. There was a

magical light shining in his palm.

Not good! I thought, and in that instant, I let myself fall backward.

This seemed to catch Zain off guard. He lost his balance and had to catch himself. The stumble must have wrecked his concentration, because the magical light died in his hand as it moved through empty air.

While on my back, I kicked up at Zain's stomach! "Guh!" He let out a small groan. Forsaken humanity or not, I guess that still had to hurt!

I let my momentum roll me back across the floor. Then as I got up, I unleashed the spell I'd recited... Not at Zain, but at another man in black!

"Flare Arrow!"

"Ugh!"

He clearly never saw it coming. My spell nailed him head-on, and the dude collapsed in place. Zain then rushed at me again, quickly closing the distance between us.

I readied my blade... then thought better of it. I had no business getting into a swordfight with a guy who could give Gourry a run for his money! Instead, I pivoted on one leg right in front of his eyes and dashed off to cross swords with another man in black.

Zain, apparently not expecting me to up and skedaddle, was slow to react. By the time he actually did, I was already deep in the fray.

Vrum! Nruum! The sound of a collapsing vacuum accompanied each slice of Gourry's sword as he cut through the invisible blades Zord threw his way. And if Gourry's current sword could do that, it was proof Zord's attacks weren't magical, but physical.

"Ohh! Very impressive!" Zord shouted gleefully as he continued to hurl his invisible blades. "I thought the first one was dumb luck, but very impressive indeed!"

Vrumm! Another soft ripping sound. And then... *Fwsh!* A small cut appeared across Gourry's side.

“Yet not even you can catch them all!”

He was right. Gourry continued to counter Zord’s invisible blades, but even with my dude’s instincts and skill, it was impossible to deflect each and every invisible attack perfectly. Some of the blades Gourry cut through were breaking into shards that needled his arms and legs. The wounds were far from fatal and would probably heal on their own given time, but they were a serious drain on him in the heat of battle. They’d hurt for one thing, and for another, they’d be distracting. What would happen if he lost his focus and failed to intercept one of Zord’s invisible blades entirely? I shouldn’t even have to say it.

Seeing Gourry bloodied up and thinking it was a good opportunity, a different man in black quickly closed in on him...

“Guh!” But before he could reach Gourry, the man suddenly pitched over. One of Zord’s invisible blades had speared his chest!

“Ahahahaha! What are you, stupid?! Why did you run to your death?” Zord laughed as he watched his own comrade die.

That was the reason Gourry had remained in place, swinging his sword instead of dodging. Zord was tossing invisible blades all around, not just at Gourry. It was impossible to predict where they might go.

“Gwahahaha! How long can you hold out?!” Zord’s maniacal laughter echoed through the room.

Whk-krash! The spell Mileena unleashed obliterated the electrified claws on the black cloak she was facing. Luke lunged at the guy now that he was basically unarmed. Yet suddenly, the man’s claws grew back to the length of swords!

Tink-krackakrackle!

Electricity raced through Luke’s blade where it met the claws. It was easily enough to kill him... *if* he’d been holding his sword at the time, that is. Fortunately, Luke had released it the moment before making contact. And then...

“Dolph Strash!” he incanted, bursting the head of the clawed man in black! “Figured you’d try that. You guys are too freakin’ obvious,” Luke spat as he

picked up his sword.

Meanwhile, Mileena unleashed the spell she'd finished casting. "Sight Frang!"

Fwsssh... Mist began to billow out from around her, filling the room. But that was all it did. Sight Frang was a nifty spell for blinding an enemy, typically to retreat, but...

"What are you doing?!" one of the men in black howled as he slashed at her.

Swsh! One slice from my shortsword took out a guy in black. Guess he'd underestimated my swordsmanship! The others quickly took their distance, swords at the ready.

Zain was coming at me from behind too. I was practically surrounded now. Time to make tracks!

"Lei Wing!" I suddenly cast my high-speed flight spell and, clad in a barrier of wind, barreled through the men-in-black blockade! I then changed course midair, turning toward Zord, who was distracted playing with Gourry. But long before I could reach him, Zain reappeared. He was standing in my flightpath, his blade leveled right at me.

Geeehhh! An old memory of a certain fishman getting filleted in exactly this way came to mind. I took desperate control of my spell and changed course again.

Huh. Wait a minute...

Struck by a crazy idea, I stuck my sword out of the wind barrier. I thought that if I cruised through some guys like this, I could take 'em all out—*bam, bam, bam*—but...

"Wugh?!" The second I held my sword out of the barrier, it was swept away by the wind! I also completely lost all balance and control, and...

Crash! I plowed into a nearby man in black. My spell instantly dissipated, sending me rolling across the ground. I thankfully managed to get up okay.

Yeah, probably shouldn't have tried that... Still, it seemed I'd mowed down three or four guys in the process.

As I got my bearings, Zain dashed at me again. This was right around the time Mileena conjured her mist.

“Guh!” A shard of an invisible blade pierced Gourry’s left arm. It didn’t look like a deep cut, but it wasn’t shallow enough to just ignore either.

“Bwahaha! Reached your limit, eh?!” Zord’s laughter rang through the room... right before everything went white, courtesy of Mileena’s mist. “What?” he whispered.

Whoosh! Just then, Gourry took off at a run.

“Fool!” Zord cried, unleashing more invisiblades.

“Hyah!” Gourry swung his sword, scattering them all flawlessly. *Vwssh! Pwing!*

“What?!” Zord released more in a panic, but Gourry cut down every last one without the slightest splintering. It was as if he could see them coming now. “The mist?!”

Indeed, each invisible blade left a very visible trail in the mist, allowing Gourry to spot them. *Of course! Mileena set this up to help him!*

“Damn you!” Zord cried in panic, letting fly more blades. Gourry easily closed the gap, however. “Ngh!”

Zord reached for the sword on his belt to defend himself, but... *Fwssh!* Gourry’s sword, coming faster than expected, cleaved the demon-man vertically.

“What?!” one of the black cloaks swinging at Mileena cried out in surprise.

It probably looked to him like Mileena had suddenly disappeared, but in reality, all she’d done was crouch down. The mist was causing his eyes to play tricks on him. And in his confusion... *Pssht!* Mileena’s strike from below pierced his gut.

Luke struck down a second confused man in black, then locked swords with a third. The black cloaks were nothing to sneeze at skill-wise, but seeing one of

their demon-fused allies felled thanks to Luke and Mileena's efforts had done a number on their morale.

"Dam Blas!"

Crash! And there went another. A man in black throwing out halfhearted attacks to keep Mileena in check ended up on the wrong end of her spell.

I was now fleeing from Zain, chanting under my breath.

"You won't escape!" he shouted after me.

When I looked back over my shoulder, I could see him in hot pursuit. Guess the grudge ran deep! He conjured a spell in his palm without an incantation and chucked it at me. Unfortunately for him, I was too far away for it to hit. I evaded the magical orb with a lithe movement. It sailed past me, disappeared into the mist, and...

Crash! I heard the sound of something breaking. It must have found one of the chamber pillars.

I continued running and ducked behind a row of the pillars lining the room. Zain was still on my tail. He was faster than me too, and quickly caught up. Magic began accumulating in his left hand again.

Now! I placed a hand to my neck and undid a small metal fastener.

Whoosh! My cape billowed off my back, and...

"?!" Zain charged right into it!

When he did, I whipped around and thrust my sword through the cape. I didn't hit anything. Moments later, I felt a presence appear behind me. He'd blinked through space—just like I expected!

"Blast Ash!" I cast the spell behind me. *Bwush!*

Blast Ash didn't require line of sight, see. You could also do things like this, reliant purely on instinct.

Clang! I heard a sword hit the ground. It was the one Zain had been holding. I turned around, and all I saw was black soot drifting in the white mist—the

remains of demonoid Zain, who hadn't even let out a scream before dying.

Wham! A handful of armed guards were on the other side of the next door we kicked in. Some were leaning against the wall, some were sitting. Some were even gathered around a table playing cards. All stopped what they were doing and looked our way as we entered.

After we'd beaten the three demonoid fusions, the rest had been easy. The men in black had completely lost their morale, and we'd polished them off with swords and spells. A few had gotten away, but we were in no position to chase them around right now. We needed to find Lavas and Wizer at once!

At least, that was the plan. Problem was, we had no idea where they'd gone. We'd set out in the direction they originally ran off in, but we eventually hit a fork in the road that stopped us cold. Thus, our group of four began searching the hard way.

Lavas had said he was going "underground" for "research." I'd asked Luke about it on the way, but he didn't seem to know anything about a basement research facility. Of course, a castle like this had to be full of secret passageways and hidden dungeons. There was no doubt that's where Lavas retreated. But since Luke and Mileena didn't know how to find the one we were looking for, we were stuck with the least efficient method possible—scouring the place room by room.

"Tch. Not here either," Luke spat, and was just turning away, when...

"Hey! Hang on a minute!" one of the guards called out. "What the hell is going on here? When can we leave this room?"

He seemed more annoyed than anything, and genuinely ignorant of the situation. Judging from his and his comrades' expressions, they still saw Luke and Mileena as allies... Did that mean they weren't consciously in on Lavas's scheme, and were being deceived themselves? I couldn't be sure, but if they thought we were on the same side, we were definitely going to exploit that.

"You dunno what's goin' on at all?" Luke asked.

Another guard responded, annoyed, "Of course not. They suddenly told us to

stand by until we received new orders, and that we weren't to come out no matter what. But we've been hearing all kinds of ruckus for a while now..."

"We'll explain later," I said, speaking up.

"You were Lord Lavas's dinner guest earlier, weren't you?" the guard asked.

"Yeah, but we can dish about that some other time. If you know of any kind of passage to a hidden room in the basement, tell us now! We have to find Regent Lavas before something terrible happens!"

At that, the guards shared a look. I wasn't technically lying. I'd just failed to mention that it was the lord regent *doing* the terrible things.

"Fine! We'll join you!" A middle-aged man serving as their commander grabbed his sword and stood up. The others followed suit.

Of course, we didn't really want them tagging along, but it's not like they were gonna stand down on my account. So the four of us plus about ten soldiers, their commander at the fore, ran down one hall and then another. Soon, the commander stopped at a dead end. I exchanged glances with Gourry, Luke, and Mileena, and we stepped back from the soldiers' ranks. The commander twisted a candlestick on the wall, pushed in a certain brick, and...

Clunk. The ostensible dead-end wall suddenly opened, revealing an entrance large enough for one person to pass through.

"Here it is," the commander said, turning back to face me.

Nice. Good boy!

"Sleeping!" I incanted, putting the guards to sleep on the spot.

"Lighting!" With Mileena's spell guiding the way, the four of us walked through the opening in the wall.

In short order, we found a staircase leading downward.

"Bingo!" Luke cried as he stormed down it with Mileena, Gourry, and me in tow. We hit a door at the bottom. Luke reached for the knob. "Tch! It's locked! Hang on, I'll—"

Before he could start a chant, Gourry stopped him and walked up to the door. Then... “Hyah!”

Cha-king! In a flash, the door fell to the floor in diced-up pieces. *Ha! Who needs a key when you got Gourry around?!*

The four of us stepped through, and...

“Whoa!”

I stopped and stared. Illuminated by a magical light hanging over the door was a room glittering in gold and silver. It was quite large, and filled to the brim with ornamented armor, swords, and accessories. Not just for decoration either. Anyone with an eye for sorcery could tell at a glance what they were.

“Holy crap! These’re all magic items! Oho! This necklace would look beautiful on Mileena!”

“Wahoo! Can you frickin’ believe it? Oho! This necklace would fetch a great price!”

“Is now really the time?” Mileena asked evenly.

Ah! Luke and I snapped back to our senses. Right. That whole Lavas thing... That said, there was no sign of him or Wizer around. And, I mean, we *had* come to the castle in the first place to swipe a magic sword. There were enough of ‘em here to make a real killing on the market. Too bad we couldn’t exactly leave the inspector and the regent to their own devices while we tallied up our haul.

“Fine!” I declared firmly while filling my pockets. “We’ll save the rummaging for later!”

“You’re actually *going* to do it later?” Mileena whispered with a wince.

Now, if this wasn’t the underground lair we were looking for, then Lavas had to have some other hidey-hole. Did this mean going back to the “search for hidden passages” game? Just the thought made me groan.

But as I was thinking that—*Crash!*—part of the wall burst inward!

Say whaaat?!

When the dust cloud settled down, we saw...

“Ah... you’re all here...”

“Old man?!”

Indeed, staggering out of the dust came Wizer, the old inspector who’d ditched us to chase after Lavas. It wasn’t exactly a triumphant return either. Our guy was pretty black and blue, and he was sporting some cuts that, while not fatal, were definitely serious.

“He’s coming...”

His words brought our gazes to the busted-in wall... where a shifting figure was slowly approaching.

A demidemon?! It certainly looked like one at a glance, but it wasn’t the lesser or brass kind I was familiar with... It had the eerily pale skin of a drowning victim and three twisted horns growing asymmetrically from its head. Its body was crooked and deformed, and emitted a choking miasma.

That said, generally speaking, the higher demons ranked, the more human they looked. Which meant, as freaky as this thing was, it probably wasn’t overwhelmingly powerful. Hard to imagine how it had given the old man such a hard time...

“Oh, there you all are. Looks like you came to the wrong underground room,” came Lavas’s voice from behind the demon. Then, with unhurried steps, he showed himself.

“You! Still not dead, huh?!” Luke scoffed, drawing his sword. “You think that one little demon can do anything against us?!”

“Hmm...” Lavas stared pensively at the demon for a time. “He *has* been asleep in lifewater this whole time. He was a failed experiment, you see, like the ones slumbering beneath the facility where Zain lured you two.”

A failed experiment?!

“Wait a minute! Are you saying those chimeras were all originally people you kidnapped too?!” I shouted.

“Yes,” Lavas responded indifferently, still peering up at the demon’s face.

The bastard!

“This demon is a rather special case, though. I carelessly piled on the abilities... and it put a tremendous strain on the body. That’s why he looks the way he does. He’s unstable and imbalanced, although he has a great deal of power to make up for it.” He paused for a moment, then turned to face us again. “Allow me to introduce... Half-Demon Experiment Mk. 1, Veisam Fritz Langmeier. The lord’s *true* heir.”

The four of us gasped. Now it made sense... I guess Wizer couldn’t attack the demon once he knew its true identity.

“This is Lord Langmeier’s castle and territory. There were plenty of people to stand in the way of my ambitions here. ‘Eliminate all obstacles’ is always good policy... But while it would have been easy enough to murder these particular obstacles, hiding the aftermath of a massacre can be difficult. So, I thought, why not use them as guinea pigs instead? They’re out of the way, it forwards my research, and once they’re no longer human, they can no longer denounce me. Logical, no?”

“No, not logical. Inhuman,” I whispered angrily.

But Lavas replied with perfect calm, “Cutting-edge pragmatists are never appreciated in their own time.”

“I don’t quite get what’s going on, but...” Gourry drew his sword and took a step forward. “I don’t think I can let you get away with it.”

“What he said,” I seconded, drawing my sword as well.

A smile appeared on Lavas’s face. “I see. If you insist... It’s not as if I intend to let you live either way. Go, Veisam.”

“Hraaagh!” The half-demon Veisam roared in response to Lavas’s command. Lavas seemed to have him completely in his thrall.

“Icicle Lance!” It was Mileena who cast abruptly at Lavas. Her projectile sailed by Veisam for Lavas, but...

Crash! A second before it hit him, Veisam raised his right hand and dispersed Mileena’s magic. Without missing a beat, he then charged right for us!

The rest of us quickly moved to dodge, but Gourry alone remained in place.

He leveled his sword at Veisam and...

No way! He can't just kill the guy!

"Hahhh!" He ducked under Veisam's arm and lashed out with his sword!
Swsh!

"I cut his heel cord!" Gourry informed us while turning his gaze cautiously between Veisam and Lavas. "That should keep him—"

Before he could finish... "Hraaagh!" With a howl, Veisam rushed him.

"What?!"

Crash! Gourry swiftly jumped aside, plunging into the mountain of treasure.

"Really now, try not to wreck the place," Lavas laughed. "I told you, I gave him a variety of abilities. He can regenerate instantly from most anything you throw at him. Short of decapitation or lopping off a limb, he'll just keep moving."

He was right. As Veisam came to a stop and looked around as if evaluating his prey, we could see the back of his left heel stained red. It was where Gourry had severed a tendon, and it had healed almost instantly.

"Now, Veisam, get it together and finish them off," Lavas ordered.

"Hraaagh!" Veisam again howled in response. A dozen arrows of flame appeared in front of him. They were aimed at Luke and Mileena... And Wizer!

Not good! The other two would be fine, but Wizer was in no condition to dodge a spell.

Ka-bwoobwoobwoosh! The flaming arrows rained down and...

"Wind Strike!" Luke swung his sword through the air, producing a shockwave to disperse the fiery volley.

"A magical sword?!" Lavas cried from the sidelines in admiration.

Indeed, the nameless magic sword Luke wielded could produce an effect similar to Diem Wind on command with a slash and some willpower.

After buffeting the arrows, Luke made a beeline for Veisam! "Nothin' personal!" he called.

Slash! A swing of his sword sent Veisam's right arm flying, and Luke kept up the momentum to charge at Lavas behind him. He had the right idea—if we could defeat Lavas, there would be no one left to control Veisam. That probably wouldn't pacify the poor guy, though...

Luke took a swing at Lavas and—*Shiiing!*—with a piercing metallic screech, his sword shattered!

What?! Lavas didn't appear to be holding a weapon. He'd merely deflected Luke's blade with a bat of his hand. *No way...*

"Ngh!" Luke quickly leaped back. *Crack!* The armor on his right shoulder also broke into pieces.

"I see. You decided to go after me first, did you? A sensible plan. However—"

"Raaaaaaaagh!" A cry from Veisam interrupted Lavas. The skin around the arm that Luke had severed had begun to turn black and melt, the effect spreading quickly to the rest of his body.

"Hmm... The imbalance is even worse than I thought," Lavas muttered calmly as Veisam's screams continued to resonate. "Enough damage and his self-regeneration goes completely haywire."

Soon, the howling turned to whimpering. Then came silence as Veisam's melting body collapsed into a black puddle in the middle of the floor.

"Less useful than I expected, I suppose. Though this does save me the trouble of disposing of him."

"How dare you..." Gourry whispered.

He readied his sword, but that was all. He must've realized the same thing I had. Given that she hadn't tried anything, Mileena had picked up on it too. While we stood there, frozen in place, Lavas slowly turned his gaze on us.

"For an army's leader to take to the field personally... is the worst of all possible strategies. Yet you've left me with little other alternative." A glint appeared in his eyes. Was it a flicker of madness, or... "I need you all to die."

"Dam Blas!" In that instant, I released the spell I'd been reciting.

But—*Fwish!*—Lavas raised a hand and dispersed it. No ordinary human could

perform such a feat. This made his true nature all too obvious.

“Lavas,” I said to the man still smiling confidently despite the loss of all his pawns. “You’re also a demonoid fusion.”



“Demonoid, eh? What an amusing description.” Slowly, Lavas approached us. Luke took a hurried step back, awed by the hostile aura radiating out from him. “It’s rather difficult to fit such power into a human form, I’ll have you know. I only recently mastered the technique. You see, I needed to empower my underlings, but I couldn’t have them using their given powers against me. And the best way to prevent that? Simple. To make myself stronger than they were.”

Damn. I’d taken Lavas for a third-rate villain who always delegated to his goons. But the way that the mere mention of *him* had cowed even Sir Zord the Reckless... That wasn’t the behavior of a man afraid of displeasing his boss. It was fear of a far more powerful being’s wrath.

“I’m a novice in both the martial and magical arts, so this will be my first field test... of how strong I am!” As he spoke, Lavas’s left hand flashed. Two magical blades flew at me and Gourry!

“Rgh!” Gourry and I groaned in unison, quickly drawing back.

Fraaaaaaash! The blades tore through the trove of magic items on the opposite side of the room.

Brr... I shuddered when I saw a magical helmet roll out in front of me, sliced in half like butter.

“Not bad, if I do say so myself! Or did I make myself *too* strong, perhaps? Bwahahaha!” With that, he threw his next attack at Luke.

Dude just managed to dodge and arm himself with a sword he picked up off the floor.

“Now, now! That’s not yours!” Lavas flicked his finger, producing another invisible blade of a shockwave. *Shing!* It hit Luke’s new sword and snapped it.

“Mileena! Get the old guy topside!” I shouted. It was too dangerous for an injured man to be hanging around during this fight.

Mileena nodded in response and began leading the man upstairs.

“Now, now! No running away!” Lavas made a seal with his hands. “Void!”

What?! In the blink of an eye, Lavas disappeared. Then...

“Wagh!” Mileena cried out, and moments later, both she and Wizer toppled down the stairs.

“Mileena?!” Luke cried as he ran over to them.

“I’m... I’m okay.” She managed to pick herself up, then pulled back with both Luke and Wizer.

“Hmm... was that one too weak?” Descending the staircase leisurely as he muttered to himself was... Do I even have to say it? It was Lavas, who’d phased through thin air.

“Elemekia Lance!”

“Futile!” Lavas shattered my spell with a magic bullet he’d unleashed. At the same time, Gourry dashed at him, sword drawn. “I told you it was futile!”

But with speed greater than Lavas had anticipated, Gourry closed in and took a swing!

“Ugh!”

Clatter! Dang, Gourry almost had him! Lavas had unfortunately managed to move right in the nick of time to break the sword. But... *Fwsht!* Lavas trembled slightly.

Gourry had another blade in his left hand—one he’d probably swiped up from off the trove on the floor. The instant his first sword broke, he’d drawn the second and thrust it into Lavas’s stomach.

Did he do it?! As I wondered that, Gourry released the sword and leaped back. *Tink!* An invisible blade cut cleanly through his shoulder guard.

“Impressive indeed!” Despite being run through, Lavas’s confident tone didn’t waver. “If only you’d been kind enough to assume I was defeated and let your guard down!” He pulled the sword out of his abdomen. Not a single drop of blood spilled from the wound.

It didn’t work?!

“Now, I’ll start with...” Lavas slowly turned toward Mileena and Wizer.

“Ruby-Eye Blade!” Howling, Luke charged at him. He’d picked up another sword that was now aglow with red light. Lavas looked over his shoulder, and... *Vrum!*

“Gwuh!” It was Luke who fell to the ground with a grunt.

Multiple somethings—lances or tentacles, it was hard to describe them—had erupted from Lavas’s back, piercing Luke’s shoulder and left thigh.

Holy crap! This guy really had sold out his humanity!

“Blast Ash!” Mileena threw a spell at him, but...

“Void!” Lavas, blinking again, appeared right next to her. “That was far too predictable!”

Wham!

“Hgn!” Mileena moaned when Lavas kicked her hard in the trunk. He raised his hand aloft, and...

“Blast Ash!” Then my summoned darkness started to envelop him from his left side. *Bwom!*

I wasn’t sure why myself, but on instinct, I leaped to the side. When I did...

Vwum! A pair of magical blades ripped through where I’d just been standing.

Pwsssssh! With the sound of air being let out of a balloon, the blackness of my Blast Ash swirled and disappeared.

“Graaaaaaaagh!” From within it, Lavas appeared with a scream.

This was a spell that could take out a brass demon in one hit, and he’d no-sold it with his magic power alone?! The way he howled in pain as the skin on his face turned a dusky ash color suggested it had done *something*... but for him to survive put him on a level above most pure demons!

After one of the blades Lavas unleashed passed me by, it had crashed into the stone floor and smashed the various magical items strewn about it... No. Amidst all the shredded remains, a single glint of silver lingered. The intact blade of a magic sword freed from its sheath?!

“Gourry! That sword!”

“Right!” Gourry leaped in response. Lavas threw an invisible blade after him.

He can't dodge that! I thought, but a split second later—*Swsh!*—Gourry slashed aside the shockwave with the sword.

“Tch!” The slightest hint of panic crossed Lavas’s face. He leaped to the wall and grabbed a magic sword for himself.

Gourry dove straight at him. Lavas held the sword in his right hand and threw an invisible blade from his left. But one slash from Gourry’s sword rent it asunder!

“Rgh!” Lavas quickly readied the sword in his right hand.

It was probably a magical blade on par with the one Gourry had picked up. Lavas most likely meant to block Gourry’s attack with it, pinning him in place, and then hit him close-range with an invisible blade attack from his other hand. But if their swords were equals, this would come down to a contest of skill!

Clink! Gourry slashed through Lavas’s magic sword, hand and all—and kept going through his waist! But...

“Guh?!” Gourry, having sped past Lavas in his attack, quickly whipped around to dodge something. Lavas had unleashed spears from his back that sailed through the air just beside him! “You...!” Gourry took his distance and assumed a fighting stance once more.

For, even cleaved in two through his midsection... Lavas hadn’t fallen. At least, not completely. I wasn’t sure how he was doing it, but Lavas’s body was now gone from the waist down and the rest of him—his upper half—was floating in the air.

“How... How dare you ruin my body?!” The cross-section of his severed right hand was now swarming with tentacle-like growths.

Holy crap! How was this guy still alive and kicking?! Had he forced some powerful demon to fuse with him in his lust for power? Lavas turned back and tried to skewer Gourry with his right-hand tentacles. I could see the glint of Gourry’s sword as it moved, and though it looked like he’d sliced through the tentacles... they wriggled around his blade’s reach. Then—*Crackle-krak!*—they

unleashed a shower of electricity on the big lug!

“...Khhh!” Gourry collapsed without a word.

He was clearly trying to get up again, but the hit seemed to leave him numb. All he could do was twitch. I wanted to throw an attack spell to help him out, except I hadn’t finished my chant yet. Lavas laid eyes on the fallen Gourry, and...

“Dynast Blas!” *Crackle-krak!*

Lightning appeared from thin air to encase Lavas’s body! As for who’d cast the spell... it was the heretofore silent Wizer! Lavas contorted in pain, his mouth gaping in a soundless scream.

We’d done it! Dynast Blas was easily enough to fry most pure demons. With a hit like that—

“Graaah!” Lavas howled, and the lightning burst away from him!

No freakin’ way!

“Annoying fool!” he hissed, swiping with his left hand. *Fwoosh!*

“Gwah!” shouted Gourry, Luke, Mileena, and Wizer as the shockwave blasted them all back into the piles of treasure.

“Tch! Not as strong as I’d hoped,” Lavas spat, gazing at his left hand. And then, slowly, he turned toward me.

I found myself dropping my chant in progress. I just stood there. The spell I’d been drumming up... It was the same one Lavas had just shaken off.

This was nuts. Even knowing he was either host to or fused with a demon for power, Lavas’s endurance was unreal. His attacks themselves weren’t so different from any low-tier pure demon’s... But no low-tier pure demon could just shrug off a Dynast Blas like that. And yet...

“Ah...” A sound of surprise escaped my throat as realization dawned on me. I peered hard at Lavas. “I see... I get it now. That’s why you’re so tough to kill...”

“Ohh?” Lavas narrowed his eyes in amusement.

“The clothing and accessories you’re wearing... They’re all magic items, right? For defense and recovery.”

That would explain everything. I’d been wondering why, with all these magic items lying around, he wasn’t using any himself. Why would a person (okay, not technically a person anymore) this self-obsessed not deck himself out in armor?

“Finally figured it out, did you? You’re exactly right,” Lavas admitted readily. It wasn’t his own magic power that had allowed him to resist a Blast Ash or sweep aside a Dynast Blas, but the power of the magical protection he was wearing.

“So, what’s the plan now that you know?”

Geh... I didn’t actually know what to say to that.

“There isn’t one, is there? Your allies have fallen, leaving you all alone. What do you think you can possibly do?”

He was right in that my little eureka moment didn’t change my predicament. A Dragon Slave would take him out, but that wasn’t a realistic option in a place like this. That left me the option of amplifying a spell like Dynast Blas, which could defeat a pure demon at standard strength... But I had a feeling he’d just dodge it if I tried.

Either way, I still had to try! I started working on the chant.

“Futile!” In response, Lavas fired an invisible blade from his left hand.

His aim was poor and I saw it coming, so I speedily leaped aside. He seemed weaker now. Even with his magic protection in place, tanking an attack spell with only half a body was bound to bring some cracks to the surface.

Lavas next lashed out at me with his tentacle arm. Was he going for another electric shock?! I kicked a sword lying at my feet, sheath and all, at the tentacles. *Crackle!* The blade shorted the electricity from the tentacles. I followed up by kicking a nearby globe at Lavas. These were pretty petty attacks—childish, even—but I didn’t know how else to buy time. It’s not like you can just bring a sword to a tentacle fight.

“Ngh!” Seeming frustrated by my persistence, Lavas used his tentacles to smack down everything I kicked his way. “Enough!” He then raised his left hand and released an area-of-effect shockwave. It was weak but covered a wide

range, making it impossible to dodge.

In that case... I took a big leap back. Just as I touched off the ground—*Crash!*—the shockwave hit me.

Even jumping back to ride the momentum rather than fight it, I really felt that one. Still, I managed to endure the pain and land upright, kicking aside some more scattered treasure in the process. Then I finished my spell!

“Dynast Blas!”

“Void!”

My voice and Lavas’s rang out in unison. He instantly vanished.

Knew it! He freakin’ dodged! The electricity I unleashed zapped empty air. As it did, I felt something behind me. Of course, I’d known this was coming... I simply leaped to the side as the invisible blade whizzed past me. Then I turned and leaped back. Lavas and I squared off from a distance again.

Damn it. This confirmed my worst fear. He’d always blink away the second I incanted words of power. If he were warping around at random, I could chant on the run and strike wherever he appeared, but... either Lavas realized that or he was just a little jerk, because he always reappeared behind me. If only there was a way to exploit that...

Casting a Dynast Blas over my shoulder was out, of course. I’d end up caught in the blast. Maybe if I could use the brief time lag between when Lavas disappeared and when he appeared to get around into his blind spot... No, he’d have a plan for dealing with that already.

Wait a minute... Yeah, that would work!

I pulled farther away from Lavas and began reciting a spell. This was Ragna Blade, a black magic number that called upon the power of void, capable of tearing apart even the kinds of pure demons that could soak a Dragon Slave. No amount of protection from magical items could save him from getting nailed with this baby. Its main drawbacks were its short duration and range, but it was my only ticket to victory right now!

“Curse you!”

Maybe he didn't want any repeats of our earlier clashes, because Lavas was now avoiding lightning tentacle attacks and wide-range shockwaves. He continued to fire the smaller invisible blades, however, each strike scattering more and more treasure. The room glinted with flashes of silver and gold. I dodged every attack that came my way... then released my spell!

"Ragna Blade!"

"Void!"

As expected, Lavas phased away at the first hint of my words of power. But I now had my dark blade in my hands, and I made my move.

Lavas reappeared right behind where I'd been standing. He wasted no time throwing a shockwave in front of him and shooting tentacles from both his arm and his back. But I was nowhere to be seen.

He paused, alarmed by losing track of me. And in that instant, without warning...

My blade of darkness cleaved Lavas through.

Splut... Sluph... His left half hit the floor, followed by his right.

My dark blade vanished, and I looked over my shoulder to see Lavas's further bisected upper body lying behind me. It was crumbling into white sand before my eyes. So ended Lavas, the mad king who'd made a demon of himself.

After determining that he was gone for good, I stood up.

Lavas had probably died unaware of how he was beaten, but the idea behind it was quite simple. The moment he'd blinked through space, I'd stretched my arms out and fallen backward. Lavas had then appeared right above me, oblivious as to where I'd gone. See, the loss of his lower half gave him a new blind spot—below him. I'd only had to flex my abdominal muscles and sit up to finish him.

"Guess it's all over now," I whispered to myself.

"Not... quite..." Gourry responded. With everyone else unconscious, he was the one of my allies who rolled over to face me. "Would you mind... patching us

up?”

“Anyway, I s’ppose I should thank ya,” Luke admitted somewhat bashfully as we sat around the table.

It was now the day after our fight beneath the castle, and everyone had had a chance to recover. Fortunately, none of them had proven especially hard to heal. A little Recovery spell and a good dose of bed rest worked wonders. Of course, the latter also meant it was noon before the others could join me at the table, leaving us to enjoy a meal that wasn’t quite breakfast and wasn’t quite lunch.

“Thank me? For what?” I asked in response, stopping with a piece of bread halfway to my mouth.

“Well, we’d be dead now if you hadn’t beaten that bastard. So... I figured I oughta say thanks.”

“You can say it with a thousand gold coins!”

Bfft! Perhaps realizing I was serious, Mileena, who was silently sitting beside Luke, expressionlessly spat out her soup.

Luke tried to change the subject. “But all joking aside—”

“Not joking,” I interjected calmly.

“—Who do you reckon’s gonna take over here?” Luke continued, gazing into the distance as he tried to force the change of subject.

“That’ll be a grand, please,” I insisted, forcing it back.

“Think they’ll appoint another lord?”

“I’ll accept 999!”

Sweat began to trickle down Luke’s face. *Aha! Almost got ‘im!*

“I’ll bet the guys in black are still around here an’ there, but I wonder if they’ll keep doin’ their thing, what with their boss dead an’ all.”

“Fine, you got me. Nine-ninety.”

“Argh! Shut up already!”

It was Luke who caved first. *Heh. Simpleton.*

“Anyway! Judgin’ by the look of things, I’d say we helped you out too! And you probably swiped a ton of treasure from that room! Includin’ that sword!” he barked, pointing with his fork at the new sword on Gourry’s belt.

He had me there. It was indeed the very blade that had survived Lavas’s attack and cut the guy in two. I didn’t know what its magical deal was, but it seemed like a pretty special item. Man... first the pauldrons I’d bought a little while back, and now this unknown sword. We were winding up with a lot of mystery equipment lately. But that was neither here nor there.

“I’ll admit plenty of trinkets from that trove found their way into my pockets.” I nodded in agreement to Luke’s observation. “However, my dear Luke, that has no bearing on this. Human greed knows no bounds!”

“Oh, c’mon! If you want money so bad, just head back to the castle and take whatever else you want from the basement!”

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea!”

“Not that it’s any of my business... but perhaps you should refrain from discussing crimes in front of an inspector,” Wizer interjected, a hot sandwich in one hand.

“We’ll save that for later, then. So, what are you two gonna do next?” I asked.

Luke and Mileena shared a glance. “Same as always, right?” Mileena responded.

“S’right. We’re gonna travel the world in search of treasure. Me and Mileena’s romantic journey continues!”

“He’s correct... aside from the ‘romantic’ part.”

“Excuse me, but aren’t you forgetting something?” The one who objected was Wizer. “There’s still cleanup to be done here, remember? All most folks know boils down to, ‘Something happened at the castle yesterday, and now Regent Lavas is gone.’ If no one steps in to clear things up, you’ll be taken for murderers!”

“Oh...” we all sighed in the same breath.

Dude was right, though. The castle guards *had* seen us searching out the hidden basement chamber and all. They probably knew our names too...

“Now, I can handle most of it myself, but I still need each of you to give a formal statement. First, I’ll ask the sorcerers’ council to get in touch with the relevant offices. Then we’ll hold an inquest and inspect the scene. It’ll probably take about a month. Sorry, but you made this bed... It’s time to lie in it,” Wizer informed us, a slightly nasty grin on his face.

Ugh...

And so we put Solaria City behind us... wasn’t something I’d get to say for a while.

Afterword

Scene: Author + L

Au: That's another reprint come and gone! This was volume 10, "*Conspiracy in Solaria*"!

L: Isn't Solaria the name of the hotel you were staying at when you had to name it?

Au: Yes! I think I mentioned this somewhere before, but I was staying at a hotel for an event at the time, and my editor needed me to settle on a title for publicity reasons. So I just used the hotel name. Er... Well, not *just*. The place wasn't called the Conspiracy in Solaria Hotel or anything.

L: I think that went without saying! Still, how could you just nick a name like that? You should've at least tweaked it a little.

Au: Well, I do tweak names now and then. But if I go too far, I can end up duplicating the name of a character I've used before or altering something into obscurity.

L: I seem to recall a short story where something about a nine-tail fox became something about an obnoxious couple.

Au: Sometimes I put *G*ndam* parodies in the short stories too. There was also a time I included a Northern Song Dynasty (Hokusou) vase that I tweaked by making Hokusou into "fox owl" (fokkusu ouru). It had a fox and an owl crest. Stuff like that.

L: I imagine nobody figured that one out.

Au: Yeah. I thought people might not, so I dropped a couple of hints, but no one recognized the origin of the vase.

L: It kinda feels like... maybe you should own up to it.

Au: Well, when I'm playing games on my own time, I prioritize clarity for myself. I frequently give my characters obvious names. For instance—I don't

use this one anymore—but before I debuted as an author, I’d have a mage named Lina. An RPG I played a few years ago had so many character classes that I couldn’t keep them straight, so I just named my characters after them. The warrior guy was Battler, and the warrior lady was Figh from “fighter.” I’d also give my female units cute-sounding names with “lin” at the end. For example, I’d have a star mage called Starlin.

L: That’s awful! There’s nothing feminine or cute about that! I hope your allies throw you into line! I can’t even tell if those are tweaks or cop-outs!

Au: But compared to that, naming Solaria after a hotel is nothing!

L: Honestly... I know you’re probably just messing with me, but anything would sound better after those horrible examples. I have a feeling that Sherra’s a victim of your terrible naming sense too, isn’t she?

Au: At first it was just a joke, but later on I had a Q&A with fans that went kind of like this...

Q: “Dynast’s four subordinates aren’t named Dai, Nast, Grau, and Sherra, are they?”

Me: “That’s awesome! I’m stealing it!”

Au: That’s how it happened!

L: Don’t outright steal things! And now I feel bad for Dynast’s subordinates!

Au: Ha! No worries. I’ll tweak them a little so it’s like... Dae and Nosst and Grao and...

L: Don’t just tweak them *that little*! Hey! I was wondering, but... You didn’t name *me* irresponsibly like that, did you?!

Au: That would be funny, but sadly, no.

L: Sadly?! I’m starting to wonder... Did my self-imposed moratorium on slaughter in afterwords to improve my image give you the mistaken impression that you could get smart with me?

Au: Wait, that was a PR thing?!

L: Yeah. And I’d say the jig is up. Fortunately, I happen to have one of those

Author Destructo Lasers that the karaoke place was giving out to celebrate the grand opening of their new location near the station.

Au: What?! Wait! How did you get such a tailor-made— *Zzzzzt! Fwsh.*

L: The author has now been reduced to his component particles. But as long as darkness remains in men's hearts, cheap and overly obvious naming schemes will continue to plague the world. They're the worst for those who must bear them, so when you lovely readers have kids, make sure not to give them weird names! And with that warning to all of humanity... So long, everyone! See you next volume!

Afterword: Over.

Slayers 10

CONSPIRACY IN SOLARIA

“Not scared
of a woman in
pajamas, eh?”

“Nope.”

“In that case...”

I decided to try a new threat
against the defiant thief.





**The sealed chimeras flooded
out from the broken tubes!**

With a magnificently timed sweep,
Luke cut deep into Zord's side!
But then...



Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

Well, I believe we left off last time hinting that we might see Luke and Mileena again, so shall we open with them?

[Liz/TL]

Sure.

[Meg/ED]

I guess we don't actually *see* them until the end of the first chapter, and they're on the wrong side of the table to start, but our mercenary odd couple is definitely back this volume. And in a pretty interesting capacity, I think.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, as much as we might think of Luke and Mileena as "replacements" for Amelia and Zel, the author clearly doesn't want to repeat the same trick. They might work with our heroes, but they're really out to serve their own interests first and foremost. They're smart enough to know they can trust each other's judgment (well, Mileena is, at least) but they're not about to pool their resources to serve a common good.

[Meg/ED]

Nope! Not these people. It's fun, though, because—arguments about loot aside—they actually do a really good job of working together toward a common goal. Especially now that they're not being cagey with each other.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, they're more like competent equals earning a grudging respect. Whereas Zel and Amelia really felt like they were designed for the adventures they appeared in, if you didn't know Luke and Mileena were created for these books, you might almost think they were protagonists from another series doing a team-up crossover.

[Meg/ED]

That's so true. It's easy to believe that Luke and Mileena have their own backstories, motivations, and objectives outside of what's going on in this storyline. They just happened to cross paths with Lina and Gourry here, and so they get to enjoy the ride together.

Part of what's interesting to me, though, is that because Luka and Mileena have their own thing going on, their presence adds flavor and fun rather than serving some integral plot-based purpose. What I mean by that is that I don't think Lina and Gourry actually needed their help to "solve" this case, but their involvement certainly gives us outside insight into things. A better view of the bigger picture. We likely could have come to the same resolution by the end without them, but we'd be left with a few more questions.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah. In an alternate universe, it's possible Lina would have ended up doing what Mileena did, provisionally trusting Lavas while being skeptical of his motives, not unlike what we saw her do in volume 2.

[Meg/ED]

I did find myself feeling like this story has a lot in common with volume 2, but it's true that Luke and Mileena are in the same shoes Lina and Gourry were back then (that is, hired to protect a local big shot who might be up to no good). It's a shame Lavas turns out to be a way badder dude than Talim!

[Liz/TL]

His motivations are different than Halciform's, but he's definitely running a similar scheme on a much larger scale. The demonoid fusions also threw me back a little to Rezo's treatment of copy-Rezo back in book 3.

[Meg/ED]

I hadn't really made the copy-Rezo connection because I was so fixated on the volume 2 parallels, but you're absolutely right. I guess this makes Lavas a particularly interesting villain in a way. We've had antagonists like Rezo and Halciform who were willing to experiment on other people in the name of their own benefit, and we've had antagonists like Zuma and Duclis who were willing to transform themselves to satisfy some personal quest... and Lavas really checks both of those boxes.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, I feel like the willingness to revisit themes (schemes?) like that is part of the author's commitment to making the world feel real, large, and lived-in. If making demon chimeras is a thing you can do, why wouldn't there be a dozen megalomaniacs out there, each seeing how far along they can take the technology? And each time, we as the readers learn a little more about how it works and what it can do.

[Meg/ED]

It indirectly helps us understand why things like the sorcerers' council exist, and why what happened in Dils was such a tragedy. It's good show-rather-than-tell-style world building.

I suppose each megalomaniac we meet is also a friendly reminder that, for all her chaotic leanings, Lina's actually a pretty good girl! With her power, she easily could've turned into one monster of a supervillain. And on that note, I guess that's why, without Amelia around, we have to throw in characters like Wizer every now and then to keep her on the straight and narrow.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, I wouldn't exactly say Lina is "lawful" in the novels, but she seems to be a little more concerned with respecting institutions, if nothing else than as a practical concern. So here, Lina and Wizer can be partners in not-crime, whereas the anime pits them against each other. That said, while Wizer and Ruvinalgald actually do give us a rare tie back to the anime here in the later volumes, I'm not sure there's a whole lot of comparison we can do. Like Duclis, they appear to have gotten a more or less total rewrite outside of their basic existences in the setting.

[Meg/ED]

It's fun to speculate about the potential connections (i.e., how much of what's going on in *Revolution* actually applies here in the book, if any at all?), but for all intents and purposes, Ruvinalgald is kind of a black box in volume 10 since we have no real idea what's happening there.

[Liz/TL]

True. And it's possible that's expanded on more in the short stories, and it's also possible that how things are portrayed there is closer to what we see in the anime. I mean, when Wizer reveals himself, it seems like we're supposed to know who he is... Though I can't say I would be surprised to find out it was just the author playing with the Law of Conservation of Characters, making us assume that the masked man must be a previously named character in the story, when it's actually someone we've never met but who would have a reasonable interest in the mystery. I, for one, certainly assumed the masked man would turn out to be the missing heir, so learning that guy's actual fate was pretty disheartening.

[Meg/ED]

I know! Because I was drawing parallels to volume 2 while I was reading, I got my hopes up that Veisam would emerge from the shadows toward the end and have some bittersweet-yet-humanizing moment with Lavas. Boy, was I wrong. Learning, much less seeing, what became of the guy was painful. There's not

even much of a moral to salvage out of this one, so these “part 2” volumes seem to be walking a grim road. I do have to say that I would’ve loved to see the treasure room fight animated, though. That was a bright spot of fun along the way.

[Liz/TL]

You could definitely do a punchline with Lina’s solution at the end. But yeah, if you’re seeing these books taking us on a grim road, I’m afraid our next volume isn’t going to make things much brighter.

[Meg/ED]

Sounds like there’s trouble in Crimson too!

[Liz/TL]

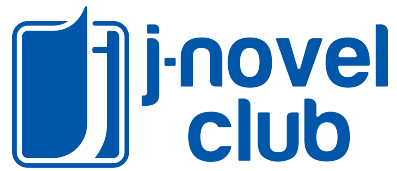
Dark goings-on in the sunset town, for sure. We won’t see Luke, Mileena, or the men in black next time, but that doesn’t mean we’re starting a new storyline...

[Meg/ED]

Bring it on, I say!

[Liz/TL]

No choice but to press on. To Crimson!



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Slayers: Volume 10

by Hajime Kanzaka

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SLAYERS Vol. 10

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2021